

2011 SESSION

ENROLLED

HOUSE RESOLUTION NO. 74

Celebrating the life of Henrietta Lacks.

Agreed to by the House of Delegates, February 18, 2011

WHEREAS, Henrietta Lacks was born Loretta Pleasant on August 1, 1920, in Roanoke, and was raised by her grandfather on a tobacco farm in Clover, where their ancestors had worked as slaves; and

WHEREAS, Henrietta Lacks married David Lacks in 1941, and had five children with him; they later moved to Baltimore, where he worked in a factory; and

WHEREAS, in 1951 Henrietta Lacks learned that she had a cervical tumor that was growing at an accelerated rate; and

WHEREAS, although she received painful radium treatments that appeared to be effective, the tumor was growing faster than the radiation could treat it, and Henrietta Lacks succumbed to cervical cancer on October 4, 1951, at the age of 31, and was buried in an unmarked grave in a family cemetery in Clover; and

WHEREAS, the legacy of Henrietta Lacks was just beginning; unbeknownst to her husband and family, doctors at Johns Hopkins Hospital had taken samples of her tumor during her treatment, without her permission, a common practice in that era; and

WHEREAS, Henrietta Lacks' cells were given to Dr. George Gey, who for decades had attempted to grow cancer cells outside of the human body without success; Henrietta Lacks' cells doubled every 24 hours and would divide and replenish themselves indefinitely, creating an immortal line of cells to be used for research; and

WHEREAS, this amazing breakthrough provided Dr. Gey and other researchers with cells that survived outside of the human body for longer than 36 hours; the strand was named "HeLa" for Henrietta Lacks, and the cells were distributed freely around the world to researchers who requested them; there are now literally tons of HeLa cells in existence; and

WHEREAS, today, 60 years later, Henrietta Lacks' cells continue to grow; they have traveled in space, advanced medical research in fertility and genetics and the understanding and treatment of cancer and AIDS, and contributed to the invention of the first effective polio vaccine by Jonas Salk; and

WHEREAS, HeLa cells were used to gauge the effects of radiation on human cells, research that led to the development of an HPV vaccine and helped to explain why Henrietta Lacks' cancer was so aggressive and resistant to radiation treatments; and

WHEREAS, the story of Henrietta Lacks is simultaneously fascinating and heartbreaking, because not until recently has her role in the origin of these cells been publicized; her children learned the details of her medical records not from Johns Hopkins Hospital but from a book about HeLa cells and their use in medical research; for decades, her children had been kept in the dark about their mother's life after she visited Johns Hopkins Hospital in 1951; and

WHEREAS, what Henrietta Lacks' cells have achieved is remarkable and cannot be understated; however, they were obtained without consent in an era when such things were commonplace, and her family, in spite of the discoveries that their mother's cells have helped create, have struggled to afford their own healthcare while many fortunes have been made based on the research that utilized HeLa cells; and

WHEREAS, were it not for the work of Henrietta Lacks' children, especially her daughter Deborah Lacks, and Rebecca Skloot, the author of the book that finally told the story of Henrietta Lacks, the origination of the HeLa cell line might never have come to light; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED, That the House of Delegates, during Black History Month, celebrate the life of Henrietta Lacks, in honor of all who have ever faced discrimination and exploitation, and her amazing legacy, which has altered medical research and care and relieved the suffering of untold millions; and, be it

RESOLVED FURTHER, That the Clerk of the House of Delegates prepare a copy of this resolution for presentation to the surviving children and descendants of Henrietta Lacks as an expression of the House of Delegates' respect for her memory and unknowing contributions to medical science and gratitude for the important medical discoveries that have resulted from her cells.

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