

SENATE JOINT RESOLUTION NO. 483

Celebrating the life of Leroy Rountree Hassell, Sr., first African American Chief Justice of the Virginia Supreme Court.

Agreed to by the Senate, February 17, 2011

Agreed to by the House of Delegates, February 22, 2011

WHEREAS, Leroy Rountree Hassell, Sr., was born on August 17, 1955, in Norfolk, and, having run his race with hope and perseverance, entered into eternal rest on February 9, 2011; and

WHEREAS, the fifth of six children whose parents were educators, Leroy Rountree Hassell, Sr., was nurtured in a home filled with faith and love and an appreciation for learning, and his parents instilled in him the dignity and worth of public and community service; and

WHEREAS, a stellar student and the consummate achiever, Leroy Rountree Hassell, Sr., graduated from Norview High School in Norfolk; earned a bachelor of arts degree from the University of Virginia in 1977, where he won a Scholar of the Year award and was selected to live on the Lawn; and was awarded the Juris Doctor degree from Harvard Law School in 1980, where he was a member of the *Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review* and served as an admissions recruiter; and

WHEREAS, after law school, he joined the law firm of McGuireWoods, where he specialized in commercial and professional liability litigation, and became a partner in a record seven years; he served as cocounsel to the Richmond Redevelopment and Housing Authority, and he was a member of the Richmond City School Board and served a term as its chairman; and

WHEREAS, accustomed to breaking down barriers and overcoming obstacles, Leroy Rountree Hassell, Sr., was the first African American high school student to win the coveted University of Richmond debate tournament, the youngest chairman of the Richmond City School Board, and the second African American justice on the Supreme Court of Virginia, and he believed and maintained that an individual should never allow his youth or race to impede his dreams, aspirations, and goals; and

WHEREAS, in 1989, Governor Gerald L. Baliles appointed Leroy Rountree Hassell, Sr., to the Supreme Court of Virginia; in August 2002, he was selected by his fellow justices as the 24th Chief Justice, thus becoming Virginia's first African American Chief Justice; and he concluded his second term as Chief Justice on January 31, 2011; and

WHEREAS, during his tenure as Chief Justice, Leroy Rountree Hassell, Sr., served with distinction as chair of the Judicial Council and the Committee on District Courts and as president of the Judicial Conference of Virginia and the Judicial Conference of Virginia for District Courts, making certain that committees and commissions under his direction reflected the geographical, racial, and gender diversity of the Commonwealth; and

WHEREAS, as Chief Justice, Leroy Rountree Hassell, Sr., instituted changes to ensure the efficient and effective operation of a judicial system in which "all Virginians are treated fairly with dignity, equality, and respect," and with tireless energy and dedication, he amassed the following singular accomplishments: established a commission to make recommendations to ensure that the Virginia court system continues to deliver justice to all Virginians effectively and impartially; established the Annual Indigent Criminal Defense Seminar to provide free continuing legal education to practitioners of indigent defense; supported the General Assembly's increased compensation for court-appointed criminal defense attorneys and public defenders; worked to increase the availability of pro bono legal services, challenging the Virginia Bar Association and other statewide bar associations, local bar associations, and the Virginia State Bar to work cooperatively to expand services for indigent persons and ensure that all Virginians have access to high-quality legal representation; led the Office of the Executive Secretary to provide an annual course on the management of capital murder cases for circuit court judges, providing additional tools for the efficient administration of justice in these cases; secured funding from the General Assembly to create a foreign language interpreter program and hire full-time foreign language interpreters to serve the courts of the Commonwealth, thereby improving and reducing the cost of interpreter services; and appointed the Commission on Mental Health Law Reform to conduct a comprehensive examination of Virginia's mental health laws and services and recommend reforms, including improvements to the involuntary commitment process, many of which were enacted by the General Assembly; and

WHEREAS, in addition, Leroy Rountree Hassell, Sr., worked successfully with the General Assembly to reform and restructure the magistrate system, improving oversight of and standards for magistrates; obtained increased compensation for all judges and judicial branch staff, which allows Virginia's courts to benefit from the retention of experienced employees and attract highly qualified applicants; and collaborated with the General Assembly to create the Courts Technology Fund, which

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supports improvement of the courts' information technology systems and the use of technology to improve case processing for litigants and the courts, including online services such as electronic filing and online payment of fees and fines; and

WHEREAS, as Chief Justice, Leroy Rountree Hassell, Sr., established the Electronic Filing Committee to guide the judicial system's electronic filing initiative; initiated free online legal research through the Fastcase system to all members of the Virginia State Bar; founded the Supreme Court of Virginia Historical Commission to preserve the oral histories of members of the bench, the bar, and court administration and to archive historical records and artifacts of Virginia's judicial system; and created the Journey Through Justice interactive website to provide supplemental educational materials on the judiciary for students and teachers, facilitating a virtual courtroom experience; and

WHEREAS, Leroy Rountree Hassell, Sr., was a passionate voice for the poor, disabled, and downtrodden during his tenure on the court, and was well-regarded and well-respected as a brilliant jurist with extraordinary legal acumen; an intellectually curious, ambitious, and energetic attorney; a devoted husband and father; and a man with a strong moral compass and a deep sense of personal responsibility that was sustained by his fervent faith; and

WHEREAS, his relaxed and engaging personality and his contemplative approach to issues made Leroy Rountree Hassell, Sr., popular with legislators of both political parties; and

WHEREAS, Leroy Rountree Hassell, Sr., contributed his time, talent, and resources to help others, frequently returning to his native Norfolk to mentor students, providing pro bono legal services to community groups, and serving as a jurist in residence at Regent University School of Law for more than four years and as a member of the Board of Visitors of the law school until his death; and

WHEREAS, in recognition of his outstanding legal and community service, Leroy Rountree Hassell, Sr., received the YMCA Black Achievers Award in 1985 and 1986, the Outstanding Young Citizen Award and the Outstanding Young Virginian Award from the Richmond Jaycees in 1987, and the American Bar Association's Liberty Bell Award in 1990; and

WHEREAS, a humble man of tremendous faith, and an active and longtime member of Faith Landmarks Ministries in Henrico, Leroy Rountree Hassell, Sr., made God the center of his life, and he enthusiastically and unreservedly shared his faith with others; and

WHEREAS, all who had the honor and pleasure of knowing him will always remember his sincerity, boundless energy, generosity, dedication and confidence, abiding faith in God, and deep, roaring, and infectious laughter; and

WHEREAS, his loving family, colleagues, and many friends can be comforted in the assurance that he is resting in the arms of his dear Savior; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED by the Senate, the House of Delegates concurring, That the General Assembly hereby note with great sadness the loss of Leroy Rountree Hassell, Sr., native son, and the first African American Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Virginia; and, be it

RESOLVED FURTHER, That the Clerk of the Senate prepare a copy of this resolution for presentation to Linda Greene Hassell, beloved wife of Leroy Rountree Hassell, Sr., as an expression of the General Assembly's appreciation of and gratitude for his contributions to the people of the Commonwealth and his dedicated service and inspired leadership as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Virginia, and the General Assembly's deep and abiding respect for his memory.