

## HOUSE JOINT RESOLUTION NO. 1008

*Celebrating the life of LaVerne Charmayne Byrd Smith.*

Agreed to by the House of Delegates, February 20, 2017

Agreed to by the Senate, February 22, 2017

WHEREAS, LaVerne Charmayne Byrd Smith, a native of Richmond, was born on December 14, 1927, and passed away on January 27, 2017; and

WHEREAS, LaVerne Smith attended Paul Laurence Dunbar Elementary and Middle School, currently Blackwell Elementary School in Richmond; she graduated from Armstrong High School in 1944, and earned the bachelor of arts degree in history and education, a double major, from Virginia Union University in 1948, to prepare herself for the study of law; she received the master of science in educational psychology and reading from Virginia State University, formerly Virginia State College, in 1964, and the doctorate in education, curriculum and instruction from the University of Maryland in 1985; she also pursued graduate studies at The College of William and Mary, Virginia Commonwealth University, the University of Virginia, and Harvard University; and

WHEREAS, due to an encounter with racial discrimination as a child, LaVerne Smith was determined to use her considerable intellect and talents after graduating from Virginia Union University to change the world by working to obliterate segregation; however, her plans to become an attorney were revised, when in 1948, she married the love of her life, Lewis "Jackrabbit" Smith, a former track star and coach, who was inducted into the sports halls of fame at Virginia Union University and Prairie View A&M University; and

WHEREAS, LaVerne Smith followed both her sisters into the profession of education and taught at several Richmond elementary schools, Virginia Union University, and Virginia State University; and

WHEREAS, according to the *Richmond Free Press*, LaVerne Smith possessed a passion for "education and writing and became a dedicated educator, civil rights activist, and writer; she began her education career in 1944 as a certified elementary and secondary education teacher at Booker T. Washington Elementary School before leaving to teach at Navy Hill Elementary School; in 1951, she transferred to West End Elementary School, where she became instrumental in the creation of a major school recital production entitled, 'Panorama of Science,' for Richmond Public Schools, which involved the participation and performance of 300 students on the subject of science"; and

WHEREAS, after teaching for more than 20 years in the public elementary schools and as a college professor training new teachers for 10 years, in 1974, LaVerne Smith became the state's first supervisor of reading and language development for state programs with the Virginia Department of Education, where she served faithfully for 16 years, working for the administrations of Governors A. Linwood Holton, Jr., John N. Dalton, Charles S. Robb, and Gerald L. Baliles; she developed the first statewide conference on reading in Virginia, which continued for 11 years; and

WHEREAS, LaVerne Smith touched the lives of thousands of students and educators as a schoolteacher, university professor, and reading specialist for the Virginia Department of Education in a career that spanned 47 years prior to her retirement in 1991 from the Department of Education; and

WHEREAS, LaVerne Smith collaborated with her sister, Elizabeth, to become a published writer at age 12 on a column called the "Younger Set" for the *Richmond Afro-American* and the *Richmond Planet* newspapers; beginning in 1939, for six years, the sisters wrote about the birthdays, parties, and activities of the city's African American youth; after her retirement, she resumed writing columns for the newspapers from 1993 to 1996, deriving great joy from penning poetry and booklets, including "The Blessed Gentle Beast," "Poetry for Growing: Kindergarten through Kollege," "Poems of Indignation: Revisiting 20th Century Civil Rights and Black Awareness Movements," "Pokey the Playful Whale," "Virginia: This is Your Life 1907-1970," and "School Desegregation Crisis in Virginia"; and

WHEREAS, LaVerne Smith was an active and dedicated member of First Baptist Church of South Richmond, one of the city's oldest African American churches, where she served with devotion as the church's historian from 1991 to 2001; she authored several volumes of church history and led a committee in writing and publishing, "Traveling On," a chronicle of the church's founding in Manchester in 1821, before the area's annexation by Richmond from Chesterfield County; as a dedicated churchwoman, she was a member of the church chorus and played the trombone in the Sunday School Orchestra; and

WHEREAS, LaVerne Smith contributed her time and talents to many organizations and received numerous accolades, national and international awards, and recognition for her extraordinary works; among her honors was the 1995 YWCA Woman of the Year award, which her two late sisters had also received; a family member stated that "she prided herself on being a teacher of teachers"; and

WHEREAS, LaVerne Smith was actively involved in civic affairs and her community, including serving as a member of the boards of J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College, the Urban League of Greater Richmond, and the Richmond Branch NAACP; she was a past president and longtime member of the Upsilon Omega Chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, and was an officer in Phi Delta Kappa, an international association for professional educators, and the Virginia Council on Human Relations; and

WHEREAS, LaVerne Smith pursued her interests diligently as a member of the Richmond Area Reading Council, the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, the Greater Richmond Chapter of the Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society, the Black History Museum and Cultural Center of Virginia, the New York Public Library's Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, and the Richmond Chapter of the Continentals Society; in addition, she loved to travel to increase her knowledge concerning Europe, Africa, the Caribbean, and other parts of the United States; and

WHEREAS, LaVerne Smith was an avid, tireless, enthusiastic, and committed champion of civil rights throughout Virginia; as a social activist, she was considered spirited, courageous, and outspoken, a "sledgehammer with a velvet glove"; according to Dr. Raymond P. Hylton, history professor at Virginia Union University, she was an unsung hero in the "1960 Richmond sit-in when thirty-four Virginia Union University students, later called the 'Richmond 34,' were arrested at Thalheimer's Department Store on Broad Street on February 22, 1960, for sitting in the 'whites only' seats at the restaurant and lunch counter; as the president of Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority, she asked her sorority sisters to cancel their annual ball and use the money allocated to it to help bail the students out of jail; she posted their bail; the sit-in participants, whose arrests were overturned by the United States Supreme Court by the end of 1960, organized the Campaign for Human Dignity, which eventually desegregated many Richmond facilities"; and

WHEREAS, Dr. Hylton stated further that "when the Virginia Teachers Association invited the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., to Richmond to address the group, he was in prison in Birmingham, Alabama; however, he was released in time to speak and LaVerne Smith was assigned to interview him; with another person driving her car, she interviewed Dr. King in the back seat as they were being driven to the campus of Virginia Union University"; and

WHEREAS, LaVerne Smith, as former president of the Richmond Council on Human Rights and a former vice president of the Virginia Council on Human Rights, chaired a conference of the Richmond council that held sessions on the topics of law and justice, civil matters, and housing and urban development planning; buoyed by the conference and under her leadership, council members worked fearlessly and deliberately to crush any obstacle that might hinder the success of desegregation during the early 1970s, including promoting open dialogue between the races, facilitating the revocation of licenses of local television and radio stations that did not employ or broadcast African Americans on air, and fostering the development of agencies such as Housing Opportunities Made Equal and Offender Aid and Restoration; and

WHEREAS, LaVerne Smith, educator, social activist, historian, and author dedicated her life to improving the lives of others; she will be remembered for her determination to ensure literacy and reading skills for all students and will be sorely missed by all who loved her; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED by the House of Delegates, the Senate concurring, That the General Assembly hereby note with great sadness the loss of LaVerne Charmayne Byrd Smith; and, be it

RESOLVED FURTHER, That the Clerk of the House of Delegates prepare a copy of this resolution for presentation to the family of LaVerne Charmayne Byrd Smith, as an expression of the General Assembly's respect for her memory.