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SENATE JOINT RESOLUTION NO. 457

Offered February 18, 2009

*Commending Robert H. Cooley, Jr., distinguished litigator, on the occasion of his 100th birthday.*Patron—Marsh

WHEREAS, Robert H. Cooley, Jr., was born in 1909 in Petersburg, where he was reared during the era of Jim Crow, which legally sanctioned racial discrimination and segregation and denied African Americans the full entitlement and benefits of citizenship; and

WHEREAS, during his formative years, Robert H. Cooley, Jr., vowed to join the struggle for civil rights to end racial discrimination, and with persistence and the assistance of his family, church, and community, positioned himself to challenge the barriers of racial discrimination by graduating from Virginia Union University in 1932 and Howard University School of Law in 1937; and

WHEREAS, after graduation from law school, he opted to return to the South to combat racial inequalities and discrimination by opening a law practice in Petersburg; and

WHEREAS, Robert H. Cooley, Jr., like other Howard Law School graduates, was very ably trained by the finest legal minds and prepared for a possible hostile courtroom environment, and he vigorously sought justice and equality for African American clients in thousands of criminal and civil cases throughout racially segregated Southside Virginia; and

WHEREAS, Robert H. Cooley, Jr., together with Oliver White Hill, Sr., and other African American lawyers, considered organizing the African American Bar in 1941 to intensify and synchronize the fight against racial discrimination following Charles Carter's protest of a policeman's attempt to enforce a Virginia State Supreme Court order that required African American lawyers to conduct legal research in the Virginia State Law Library from an alcove designated specifically for attorneys of color; and

WHEREAS, as one of the founders of the Old Dominion Bar Association, Robert H. Cooley, Jr., served as acting president of the association during World War II and focused the organization's attention on the war, federalism, labor issues, fair employment practices, the Virginia State Bar, and the National Bar Association; and

WHEREAS, he also met with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and citizens of Southside Virginia during Dr. King's visit to Petersburg to help plan civil rights activities, and served as civil rights counsel to Reverend Wyatt Tee Walker, Pastor of Gillfield Baptist Church in Petersburg, and later as Dr. King's Operations Director for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference; and

WHEREAS, in addition, due to his legal acumen, he was named legal counsel for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Freedom Bus Ride from Chesterfield to North Carolina, and he served as legal counsel for Petersburg and Southside Virginia for the NAACP's efforts to enforce the 1965 Civil Rights Act; and

WHEREAS, he served as co-counsel in a federal lawsuit resulting in a ward election system to overcome a pattern of racial discrimination in voting, and as campaign manager for the first African American to be elected to the Petersburg City Council, the first African American mayor of Petersburg, and for other elected leaders; and

WHEREAS, later his legal career included public service as the deputy commonwealth attorney of Petersburg, where he represented the interests of the Commonwealth by prosecuting offenders; and

WHEREAS, the City of Petersburg and Southside Virginia region have benefited immeasurably from his commitment and devotion to fairness and equality for all citizens in Virginia's criminal and civil justice systems; and

WHEREAS, Robert H. Cooley, Jr., is a continuing source of inspiration and a man worthy of emulation, having given sacrificially of himself to public service for more than 50 years in order to ensure equal protection before the law for all persons; and

WHEREAS, on February 28, 2009, family, friends, colleagues, the City of Petersburg and Southside Virginia will celebrate the 100th birthday of Robert H. Cooley, Jr., and show due appreciation for his brilliant legal career, dedicated public service, and faithful stewardship as a bulwark for racial equality and civil rights; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED by the Senate, the House of Delegates concurring, That the General Assembly hereby commend Robert H. Cooley, Jr., distinguished litigator, on the occasion of his 100th birthday; and, be it

RESOLVED FURTHER, That the Clerk of the Senate prepare a copy of this resolution for presentation to Robert H. Cooley, Jr., native son, sage, centenarian, and eminent lawyer, civil rights activist, and civic leader, as an expression of the General Assembly's esteem, admiration, and respect for his lifetime of distinguished legal, civil, and social achievements that helped to ensure equality before the bar and improve the quality of life of many Virginians, and best wishes for many blessed and

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59 fruitful years to come.