

2023 SESSION

ENROLLED

HOUSE JOINT RESOLUTION NO. 749

Celebrating the life of Gary Oelze.

Agreed to by the House of Delegates, February 20, 2023
Agreed to by the Senate, February 22, 2023

WHEREAS, Gary Oelze, owner of the Birchmere in Alexandria, one of the most celebrated music venues in the country and a cornerstone of cultural life in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area, died on January 23, 2023; and

WHEREAS, a native of Owensboro, Kentucky, Gary Oelze learned the guitar as a teenager and performed with groups at local dances; after a stint in the United States Air Force, he settled in the Washington, D.C., area and found work managing a drugstore in Arlington; and

WHEREAS, after a friend purchased the Birchmere Restaurant in Arlington, which was at the time a German restaurant, Gary Oelze took over management of the establishment and quickly gave the business a lift by changing its menu to better appeal to its clientele; and

WHEREAS, with an eye toward drawing in more business and celebrating a thriving bluegrass scene in Washington, D.C., that had become, at the time, increasingly relegated to smaller venues, Gary Oelze began hosting bluegrass acts at the Birchmere, finding great success with the group The Seldom Scene, which began a Thursday night residency at the venue in 1974 that would last for the next two decades; and

WHEREAS, as The Seldom Scene's star rose and the band gained recognition from leading musicians of the day, Gary Oelze's Birchmere became a necessary stop for both local music fans and national acts; and

WHEREAS, Gary Oelze took great pains to ensure that the music was the focus at the Birchmere, discouraging talking during sets and investing considerably in the venue's sound system over the years, which enabled him to cultivate a unique and intimate listening experience that was cherished by musicians and fans alike; and

WHEREAS, as the Birchmere cemented its reputation as the heart of the Washington, D.C., bluegrass scene, Gary Oelze moved the venue to a larger space in Alexandria in 1981 and continued looking for ways to innovate, which would lead the club to diversify its programming by featuring performers in the genres of jazz, rhythm and blues, pop, soul, country, and more; and

WHEREAS, Gary Oelze's Birchmere has hosted a wide range of performers through the years, from legendary artists like Ray Charles, Johnny Cash, Emmylou Harris, and Gordon Lightfoot, to former teen sensation David Cassidy, to the alt-folk musician Suzanne Vega, to outlaw country singer-songwriter Jerry Jeff Walker, who played the venue 133 times; and

WHEREAS, Gary Oelze moved the Birchmere again in 1997 to a 500-seat space to better accommodate its ever-expanding roster of world-class musicians and its growing legion of patrons and fans; and

WHEREAS, Gary Oelze was a champion of local musicians throughout his time operating the Birchmere, giving many young performers their first break, as well as guidance and support that would steer them toward successful careers; he notably helped former Alexandria resident and platinum-selling artist Mary Chapin Carpenter on her path to success; and

WHEREAS, in 2022, Gary Oelze, along with co-author Stephen Moore, published the book *All Roads Lead to the Birchmere: America's Legendary Music Hall*, preserving his memory of the venue for the benefit of future music historians and fans; and

WHEREAS, Gary Oelze will be fondly remembered and dearly missed by his loving wife of 10 years, Susan; his children, Carrie, Cheryl, and Vick, and their families; and numerous other family members and friends; 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 Gary Oelze, a cherished member of the Alexandria community whose legacy as the owner of the Birchmere has left an indelible mark on the culture of the Commonwealth and the nation; 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 Gary Oelze as an expression of the General Assembly's respect for his memory.

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