



City of Philadelphia

City Council
Chief Clerk's Office
402 City Hall
Philadelphia, PA 19107

Legislation Text

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Celebrating the life and honoring the memory of Katherine Dunham.

WHEREAS, Katherine Dunham dedicated her life to empowering individuals through dance; and

WHEREAS, Throughout Miss Dunham's life, she was a pioneering dancer and choreographer, anthropologist, author, and civil rights activist; and

WHEREAS, As an anthropology student at the University of Chicago in 1935, Miss Dunham took her first trip to Haiti on a fellowship to study Caribbean culture and dance. The experience influenced her to adopt dance and culture as her mission; and

WHEREAS, Miss Dunham defined herself by bringing African and Caribbean influences into the European-dominated dance world. In the late 1930s, she established the nation's first self-supporting all-black modern dance group; and

WHEREAS, From the 1940s to the 1960s, Miss Dunham's dance company toured internationally, visiting 57 countries. During this time, she championed civil rights by refusing to perform at segregated theaters; and

WHEREAS, As a social activist, Miss Dunham received 10 honorary doctorates, the Presidential Medal of the Arts, the Albert Schweitzer Prize at the Kennedy Center Honors, and membership in the French Legion of Honor, in addition to major honors from Brazil and Haiti; and

WHEREAS, After her travels, Miss Dunham spent most of her time in predominantly black East St. Louis, IL, where she was devoted to sharing dance and culture. She offered free dance classes, hair-braiding, wood carving and conversational Creole, Spanish, French and Swahili, in addition to aesthetics and social science; and

WHEREAS, Miss Dunham also offered martial-arts training classes as an alternative to hanging out on the streets. She stated that her purpose was to guide the residents, "into something more constructive than genocide;" and

WHEREAS, The woman known as the "Matriarch of Black Dance" graced the City of Philadelphia in 2004 through the generosity of the Free Library of Philadelphia Foundation in conjunction with the Hawthorne Cultural Arts Center, Temple University, Philadanco and Dance Advance; and

WHEREAS, Katherine Dunham will forever be remembered and honored for her commitment to enriching those who needed her guidance; now therefore

RESOLVED, BY THE COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF PHILADELPHIA, That Council does hereby celebrate the life and honor the memory of Katherine Dunham.