

Legislation Text

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Celebrating the life and legacy of Toni Morrison and her magnificent contributions to American literature and culture.

WHEREAS, Chloe Anthony Wofford “Toni” Morrison passed away on August 5, 2019, marking the end of an unprecedented creative force in American life; and

WHEREAS, Ms. Morrison ushered in an era of breakthrough black writing to mainstream media, creating a space for writers of color in the publishing world; and

WHEREAS, As the Nobel Foundation explains, “Ms. Morrison’s works revolve around African-Americans - both their history and their situation in our own time. Her works often depict difficult circumstances and the dark side of humanity, but still convey integrity and redemption;” and

WHEREAS, As a writer who was both a critical and commercial success, Ms. Morrison was an exceptionally rare talent whose life journey forged new paths in both academic, literary, and artistic circles; and

WHEREAS, As historian Henry Louis Gates, Jr. notes, “For nearly half a century, we have been looking to Toni Morrison for guidance - to help us think, through literature, as we find our way through the world. With grace and wisdom, she respected, represented and rendered the beauty and complexity of the black experience”; and

WHEREAS, Author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie reflected that Ms. Morrison “was Black and she didn’t apologize for her Blackness, and she didn’t pander and she didn’t temper the painful reality of Black American history, in a country that often seemed keen to minimize it. She stared pain in the face, unblinking. She wrote about what was difficult and what was necessary and in doing so she unearthed for a generation of people a kind of redemption, a kind of relief”; and

WHEREAS, Ms. Morrison was born in 1931 in Lorain, Ohio, to a working-class, African American family. From a young age, Ms. Morrison was a fervent reader and storyteller, counting Jane Austen and Leo Tolstoy among her favorite authors and participating in the drama club at Lorain High School; and

WHEREAS, Ms. Morrison received her undergraduate degree from Howard University in 1953, and went on to receive a Master of Arts degree from Cornell University in 1955; and

WHEREAS, Teaching English was Ms. Morrison’s first foray into the world of literature. She taught first at Texas Southern University, a historically black institution in Houston, before returning to Howard University as an instructor. Later in life she joined the faculty at Princeton University, where she taught courses in African American studies, humanities, and creative writing; and

WHEREAS, Ms. Morrison eventually entered the publishing world, moving to New York City in the late 1960s to take an editorial position with Random House’s trade-book division, where she collaborated with luminaries including Angela Davis and Muhammad Ali; and

WHEREAS, “The Bluest Eye,” Ms. Morrison’s first novel, was published in 1970, when she was 39 years of age. She crafted the novel over a span of years during what little free time she had, waking up in the early morning to write before tending to her children and heading off to work; and

WHEREAS, Ms. Morrison’s second novel, “Sula” (1973), about a friendship between two black women, was integral to the formation of black feminist literary criticism. The work was nominated for the National Book Award in 1975; and

WHEREAS, In 1987, Ms. Morrison published her most celebrated novel, “Beloved” (1987), which was inspired by the true story of an enslaved African American woman, Margaret Garner, who escaped slavery in Kentucky in 1856; and

WHEREAS, “Beloved” was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1988. The novel remained a bestseller for 25 weeks following its release; and

WHEREAS, Ms. Morrison wrote various other novels throughout her life, including “Song of Solomon” (1977), a story following the life of an African American man from birth to adulthood; “Tar Baby” (1981), which focuses on race and class prejudice among black people; “Jazz” (1992) set in 1920s NYC; “A Mercy” (2008), a story taking place in the 17th century before the institution of American slavery was formalized; and “Home” (2012), about a Korean War veteran’s struggles returning to the Jim Crow South; and

WHEREAS, In 1993, Ms. Morrison was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, making her the first African-American woman to receive the honor. Her citation reads that she “in novels characterized by visionary force and poetic import, gives life to an essential aspect of American reality” ;and

WHEREAS, As President Barack Obama wrote following her death, “Toni Morrison was a national treasure, as good a storyteller, as captivating, in person as she was on the page. Her writing was a beautiful, meaningful challenge to our conscience and our moral imagination. What a gift to breathe the same air as her, if only for a while”; and

WHEREAS, Ms. Morrison received countless honors throughout her career, including but not limited to the 2012 Presidential Medal of Freedom, which she was awarded by President Obama; the 2007 Glamour Lifetime Achievement Award; the 2004 NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Literary Work in Fiction; the 2000 National Humanities Medal; the 1986 Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters; the 1977 National Book Critics Circle Award; and the 1977 Janet Heidinger Kafka Prize. Ms. Morrison also received honorary degrees from storied academic institutions including the University of Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania State University, the University of Oxford, Barnard College, and Harvard University; and

WHEREAS, Ms. Morrison’s creative power had a number of other outlets. She wrote the libretto for an opera, “Margaret Garner,” which received its world premiere at the Detroit Opera House in 2005. She also wrote and edited a number of nonfiction volumes revolving around race and culture in America; and

WHEREAS, Americans are fortunate to have experienced Toni Morrison’s extraordinary gifts. Ms. Morrison has touched, shaped and changed the lives of countless readers, in Philadelphia and around the world; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED, BY THE COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF PHILADELPHIA, That it hereby celebrates the life and

legacy of Toni Morrison and her magnificent contributions to American literature and culture.