

Legislation Text

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Honoring and recognizing the voice, vision, and contributions of movement activist and organizer Ellen Somekawa, whose fearless and transformative leadership within Philadelphia's Asian American community has advanced major victories for racial and economic justice, built multiracial coalitions across the City, founded historic institutions, and redefined Asian American activism particularly in the area of youth leadership, education justice, and civil rights.

WHEREAS, Ellen Marie Somekawa was born in Minneapolis and raised in the Minneapolis suburb of Wayzata by her parents, the late Carl Kiyoshi Somekawa and Mari Kawanami Somekawa, along with her older brother, Roger; and

WHEREAS, Both her parents were among the more than 120,000 American citizens of Japanese descent forcibly and unjustly interned by the U.S. government during World War II. College-aged Carl Somekawa and his family were evicted from their home in Portland, Oregon and sent to the Minidoka War Relocation Center in Idaho in 1942. Meanwhile, high-school student Mari Kawanami and her parents were taken 1,400 miles from their home in San Jose, California, to Heart Mountain Relocation Center in Wyoming. Mari earned her diploma while she was imprisoned. Carl and Mari met later and were married in 1947 and lived their lives in Minneapolis - the first place Carl found a job after being denied other opportunities due to his Japanese heritage. Together, they celebrated 69 years of joyful marriage and raised their two children as the only Asian family on their block in Wayzata; and

WHEREAS, Despite the injustice of internment and the racism they faced after World War II, Carl and Mari never spoke of their experience to their children. Ellen discovered her parents' history when she was 15 years old and someone handed her a flyer referencing the Japanese American internment at a dinner for the Japanese American Citizens' League. While Ellen was already a politically active teenager who wore black armbands to class to protest the Vietnam War, she credited the moment of learning about her parents' history as seminal to understanding the silencing and erasure of Asian American history and the Asian American experience and critical to her lifelong commitment to raising up a strong Asian American voice in times of injustice; and

WHEREAS, Ellen Somekawa came to Philadelphia in 1983 to advance her education, earning a master's degree in history at the University of Pennsylvania. She quickly became active on Penn's campus - helping fight for and win an Asian American Studies program and other ethnic studies efforts as well as permanently end the name of Penn's Oriental Studies Department; and

WHEREAS, In 1988, she joined up with a young social justice organization called Asian Americans United founded by activists, public school teachers, and civil rights attorneys. She first joined Asian Americans United as a summer staffer, then joined its board of directors, and, in 1996, became its fourth executive director, where she served for almost 20 years; and

WHEREAS, Under Ellen Somekawa's leadership, Asian Americans United became a dominant force for the Asian and Asian American community - creating nationally recognized youth mentorship and leadership programs, addressing police brutality and harassment, opposing austerity budgets and uplifting community

spaces, winning tenant victories at Admiral Court and advancing the right to affordable housing, preserving the physical space and character of Chinatown against gentrification, leading international campaigns for human rights against deportation and anti-Asian violence, and ensuring that Asian Americans United and its members joined frontline multiracial efforts to demand civil and human rights for all communities - especially immigrant communities and communities of color long denied; and

WHEREAS, Ellen helped lead legendary protests and campaigns that challenged capitalism and exploitation and the forced removal and erasure of communities - and in the process brought national attention to the rise of a new Asian American movement at the local level. Among them was the fight to stop a proposed Major League Baseball stadium in Chinatown North with a price tag of nearly one billion dollars in taxpayer money. Ellen spearheaded a citywide campaign uniting communities that had been pushed out by proposed “developments”, organized a general strike by Chinatown businesses, and took over a portion of the Vine Street Expressway. Posters of packed City Hall meetings and a particularly beleaguered former Councilmember named James Kenney made the front pages. Notably, a stadium was not built, and on its footprint, Ellen Somekawa would eventually help found a public charter school; and

WHEREAS, In 2005, after years of work, Ellen Somekawa became one of the founding members of the Folk Arts-Cultural Treasures Charter School (FACTS), a historic community-led effort to create a unique educational institution located in Philadelphia Chinatown dedicated to community history and folk arts traditions. Ellen has served as a guiding vision on its board, and in 2014, became FACTS’ CEO, where she serves today. FACTS’ mission is dedicated to serving the needs of immigrant and refugee students, to promoting language diversity and traditional arts forms, and to building educational excellence, equity and social justice. In 2016, FACTS was named a national Blue Ribbon school by the Obama-era Department of Education, only the second charter school in Pennsylvania at the time to have earned the honor; and

WHEREAS, Ellen Somekawa’s devotion to community healing and preservation is felt throughout her work, her practice and in the institutions she leads. She helped middle schoolers turn a humble art performance for their elders into a venerable arts institution known as the Chinatown Mid-Autumn Festival, one of the largest folk arts events in the Delaware Valley drawing thousands of celebrants and now in its 20th plus year. Her work to create healing spaces made Asian Americans United a renowned model for supportive leadership, particularly for youth including dozens of immigrant youth who boycotted South Philadelphia High School in December 2009 and would go on to win a federal civil rights settlement to end violence and harassment at their school; and

WHEREAS, Well known for her tireless work ethic, deep integrity, and compassion, Ellen Somekawa has brought her brilliance, energy and passion to benefit organizations which work to serve the people, including the Philadelphia Folklore Project and Bread and Roses Community Fund. Her legacy lies as well in the countless people she has mentored, nurtured, and made proud to call themselves Asian Americans; and

WHEREAS, Despite her deep Minneapolis roots and unconditional love of the outdoors and frigid midwest winters, Ellen Somekawa dedicated her life to building a home in Olney along with her life partner Eric Joselyn, an arts educator and creator, whom she has lovingly known and been married to for 39 years, her children Tai Joselyn and Chi Pham, and countless friends and mentees; and

WHEREAS, Ellen Somekawa has had a transformative impact on Philadelphia history, on educational justice and on the Asian American movement. Her humble leadership is best expressed in a quote she gave to the Philadelphia Folklore Project in an exhibit of civil rights leaders and the shoes they walk in, known as “Big Shoes to Fill.” Alongside a worn out pair of her beloved black work boots, she wrote: “I see myself walking in

the shoes of the ordinary folks who have power in their numbers and in their righteousness”; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED, BY THE COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF PHILADELPHIA, That we hereby honor and recognize the voice, vision, and contributions of movement activist and organizer Ellen Somekawa, whose fearless and transformative leadership within Philadelphia’s Asian American community has advanced major victories for racial and economic justice, built multiracial coalitions across the City, founded historic institutions, and redefined Asian American activism particularly in the area of youth leadership, education justice, and civil rights.