

Legislation Text

File #: 220089, **Version:** 0

Honoring the labor and power of “Black Rosie” Ruth “Ruthie” Wilson, whose critical industrial work at the Philadelphia Navy Yard, along with six hundred thousand other Black Rosies, helped win World War II and whose labors and wages served as the launching pad of the Black middle class.

WHEREAS, Ruth Wilson was born in 1922, raised in New Jersey, and after her parents died, moved with her siblings to live with their aunt and uncle. Ruthie later moved to Philadelphia, where she found a job doing laundry at the Philadelphia Navy Yard and did other forms of domestic work; and

WHEREAS, Ruthie quit her laundry job because she was forced to work during her lunch hour. She soon after received a letter from the government telling her she was not allowed to quit because of the war. Accordingly, Ruthie returned, took a test, and was sent to vocational school. She graduated soon after, and reported to the Navy Yard for work once again, this time installing bulkheads on the USS Valley Forge; and

WHEREAS, While her husband served in the military in Europe, Ruthie worked as a sheet metal specialist and raised her two daughters alone. She faced forceful discrimination, including being prohibited from sitting downstairs in segregated movie theaters and being refused service in restaurants. Meanwhile, she performed invaluable industrial war production and single-handedly raised a family; and

WHEREAS, Ruthie’s and every Black Rosie’s invaluable labor, while men were off fighting abroad during WWII, are often overlooked in historical accounts of the war due to systemic prejudice against Black women. This negligence and underrepresentation contributes to stigmatized narratives that diminish the critical role of Black women in building our country; and

WHEREAS, Thousands of other Black Rosies, like Ruthie, worked in industrial sectors as sheet metal workers, munitions and explosives assemblers, shipbuilders, and on assembly lines as electricians. They also served as administrators, welders, railroad constructors, and much more; and

WHEREAS, Black Rosies faced powerful racial and sex-based discrimination, received lower wages and benefits, and were blocked from union membership. Despite this monumental oppression, Black Rosies endured and provided critical labor for the war effort; and

WHEREAS, After the war, women who were working as machinists and industrial laborers were not able to continue their work when men returned from war. Instead, many women like Ruth Wilson and other Black Rosies went into the “pink collar” workforce, which paid significantly lower wages; and

WHEREAS, The film *Invisible Warriors: African American Women in World War II* is a documentary on Ruthie’s story and the story of six hundred thousand Black Rosies in the United States who fought racism at home, Nazism abroad, and sexism everywhere; and

WHEREAS, *Invisible Warriors* premiered globally in 2021, and has gained worldwide acclaim. The film was co-sponsored by the Dutch government, which wanted to honor Black Rosies for their role in liberating the

Netherlands during World War II; and

WHEREAS, *Invisible Warriors* was directed by West Philadelphian Gregory Cooke, to honor who he calls “the most significant group of Black women in the 20th century.” Despite the monumental achievements of Black Rosies, American history-and specifically the women’s rights movement generally-only applauds the women who look like the icon, Rosie the Riveter. Media and history portrayals feature white Rosies sparking the change for a new era, but leave Black Rosies forgotten to history; and

WHEREAS, On September 8, 2021, Philly Shipyard Inc. welcomed 99-year-old Ruthie Wilson back to her former worksite that was formerly part of the Philadelphia Naval Shipyard. Mrs. Wilson was presented with the Appreciation Award, a framed photo of the USS Valley Forge while under construction and copies of a portrait by artist Regina Cooke in which the iconic “Rosie the Riveter” was reimagined as a Black woman, with Wilson being the face of the campaign; and

WHEREAS, Ruthie is hopeful for a future led by young people of color. When asked about the racism she faced, she boldly stated: “We always faced it, but you know, you went along with it because you had no other recourse, but you didn’t like it. Young people now are going to get their way. They’re going to change the world”; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED, BY THE COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF PHILADELPHIA, That we hereby honor the labor, and power of “Black Rosie” Ruth “Ruthie” Wilson, whose critical industrial work at the Philadelphia Navy Yard, along with six hundred thousand other Black Rosies, helped win World War II and whose labors and wages served as the launching pad of the Black middle class.

FURTHER RESOLVED, That an Engrossed copy of this resolution be presented to Ruthie Wilson as an expression of the sincere respect and awe of this legislative body.