



Legislation Text

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Honoring Equal Justice Initiative founder Bryan Stevenson for his lifelong pursuit of justice, vindicating the rights of the accused, and fighting mass incarceration.

WHEREAS, Bryan Stevenson was born on November 14, 1959, in Milton, Delaware. Stevenson began his schooling at a “colored” elementary school, but soon schools became desegregated. Even though schools were to be desegregated, old behaviors still applied when it came to children playing and interacting within their own races. He attended Henlopen High School where he graduated in 1978. He earned straight A’s and won a scholarship to Eastern University where he directed the campus gospel choir and graduated with a B.A in philosophy. In 1985, he earned a J.D and an M.P.P. from Harvard University. During his time at law school, he interned for the Southern Center for Human Rights, which represents death-row inmates throughout the South. It was this opportunity that jumpstarted his storied career; and

WHEREAS, After graduating, he moved to Atlanta where he became a full-time attorney at the Southern Center for Human Rights. Stevenson was assigned to the Center’s Alabama office, which focused on death-penalty litigation, and he was chosen to lead the office just four years later. That office was later defunded when Congress discontinued funding of death-penalty defense; and

WHEREAS, Despite the funding cuts, Stevenson found a way to continue his essential work by founding the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI). In the 30 years since, it has grown to an organization of more than 150 people. EJI is a unique legal organization in its approach to pursuit of justice. It undertakes death-penalty, juvenile-lifer, and prisoner-rights litigation, but it does much more. It assists returning citizens with re-entry, and it advocates for better policy and public understanding. That advocacy includes publication of reports, production of short films, and history projects. Among those projects are the Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration, and the National Memorial for Peace and Justice; and

WHEREAS, Stevenson and EJI have helped win multiple cases at the U.S. Supreme Court. In 2019, they won a ruling that dementia may be grounds for overturning a death sentence. In 2012, they won a ruling that mandatory life without parole is unconstitutional for juvenile. Moreover, Stevenson and EJI have won exoneration and release from prison for over 135 death-row inmates, along with hundreds of others; and

WHEREAS, Stevenson has won countless awards, including the MacArthur Fellowship, popularly known as the “Genius Grant,” which he used to fund EJI’s work. In 1991, Stevenson won the ACLU National Medal of Liberty, and in 1996, he was named the Public Interest Lawyer of the Year by the National Association of Public Interest Lawyers. In 2004, he received the Award for Courageous Advocacy from the American College of Trial Lawyers and also the Lawyer or the People Award from the National Lawyers Guild. In 2018, he was awarded the Martin Luther King Jr. Nonviolent Peace Prize from the King Center in Atlanta. Stevenson has been awarded over 40 honorary doctoral degrees from prestigious universities such as Harvard University, Yale University, Princeton University, University of Pennsylvania, and Oxford University. He also wrote an acclaimed memoir, entitled *Just Mercy*, which won the 2015 Carnegie Medal for Best Non-Fiction, the Dayton Literary Peace Prize, and the NAACP Image Award for Best Non-Fiction. In 2019, a film adaptation of *Just Mercy* was released, starring Michael B. Jordan and Jamie Foxx; and

WHEREAS, While pursuing his essential work through EJI, Stevenson is also cultivating the next generation of legal heroes as a clinical faculty member at NYU Law, where he has taught since 1998. NYU Law students have participated in a broad range of high-impact cases, including U.S. Supreme Court litigation; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED, BY THE COUNCIL OF CITY OF PHILADELPHIA, That it hereby honors Equal Justice Initiative founder Bryan Stevenson for his lifelong pursuit of justice, vindicating the rights of the accused, and fighting mass incarceration.