

Legislation Text

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Also naming Master Street between Broad Street and Carlisle Street as “Erika Alexander Way.”

WHEREAS, Erika Alexander was born on November 19, 1969 in Arizona to Robert and Sammie Alexander, and moved to East Mt. Airy in Northwest Philadelphia in 1983; and

WHEREAS, Alexander graduated from Philadelphia High School for Girls in 1987; and

WHEREAS, Alexander joined the New Freedom Theatre in North Philadelphia when she was 14, and was discovered by independent film company Merchant Ivory during the fifth week of a six-week summer acting class; and

WHEREAS, Alexander’s first onscreen acting role was in a Merchant Ivory production, 1986’s My Little Girl, a lead role she earned after twelve screen tests and four auditions; and

WHEREAS, Alexander graduated from Philadelphia High School for Girls in 1987 as a member of the 231st Class; and

WHEREAS, Alexander would go on to perform in plays at New York’s Public Theater throughout the 1980s, touring the world with The Royal Shakespeare Company in Peter Brook’s groundbreaking play The Mahabharata when she was 17 years old; and

WHEREAS, The Mahabharata reopened the famed Majestic Theater in Downtown Brooklyn, which is known to the world today as the BAM Harvey Theater; and

WHEREAS, Alexander would receive her big break in 1990 when she was cast as Pam Tucker in The Cosby Show, appearing on the highly acclaimed sitcom until the show’s finale in 1992 that took her from Philadelphia to East New York, Brooklyn; and

WHEREAS, Alexander would receive her breakout role in 1993, being cast as high-powered attorney Maxine Shaw on FOX’s Living Single, a role for which she would receive multiple NAACP Image Awards for Outstanding Actress in a Comedy Series; and

WHEREAS, Alexander would portray Maxine Shaw for five years until 1998, her character serving as an inspiration for many black women attorneys and leaders such as Stacey Abrams, Rep. Ayanna Pressley, Joy Reid, and more; and

WHEREAS, Color Farm Media discovered the “Maxine Shaw Effect” in a study showing one out of three black women lawyers surveyed saying that the Maxine Shaw character influenced their decision to attend law school, with eight out of ten black female professionals saying Maxine Shaw inspired them to pursue leadership in male-dominated professions; and

WHEREAS, Alexander's onscreen career includes numerous appearances and starring roles, such as Selma Cotter in *The Long Walk Home*, Ciel in *54*, Detective Latoya in *Get Out*, Perenna in *Black Lightning*, Shanti in *Déjà Vu*, Yolanda in *Insecure*, Constance Irving in *Bosch*, Linda Diggs in *Wu Tang: An American Saga*, and Barb Ballard in *Run The World*, for which she was nominated for an NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Guest Performance; and

WHEREAS, Alexander's television career includes many guest starring spots on *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, *ER*, *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*, *Criminal Minds*, *LAX*, *7th Heaven*, *House*, *Suits*, *Grey's Anatomy*, *Last Man Standing*, *Swimming with Sharks*, and a reprisal of her Maxine Shaw character on a 2005 episode of *Half & Half*; and

WHEREAS, In 2024 Alexander received numerous plaudits for her role as Coraline opposite Jeffrey Wright in the critically acclaimed *American Fiction*, being nominated for an Independent Spirit Award and NAACP Image Award for Best Supporting Actress as well as a Screen Actors Guild Award for Outstanding Performance by a cast in a Motion Picture, amongst a haul of nominations and awards the film would receive; and

WHEREAS, Alexander's artistic work has extended beyond the big screen, co-authoring several comics and graphic novels, including the critically acclaimed *Concrete Park*, and stepping behind the camera to co-direct PBS's *The Big Payback* in 2023, which served as Alexander's directorial debut; and

WHEREAS, *The Big Payback* was produced by Color Farm Media, an award-winning entertainment, innovation, and social impact venture Alexander co-founded with Ben Arnon in 2017 to bring diverse and underrepresented stories to the big screen; and

WHEREAS, In 2020 Color Farm Media released their acclaimed documentary film titled *John Lewis: Good Trouble* about the late Congressman and civil rights icon that won an NAACP Image Award for Best Documentary and was nominated for three Emmy Awards; and

WHEREAS, In 2022, Alexander served as the creator, writer-producer, and host of Color Farm Media's groundbreaking audio series, *Finding Tamika*, about missing black woman Tamika Huston. The series, produced with Audible, won the prestigious duPont-Columbia Award for excellence in journalism, was Audible's Best True Crime series of the Year, and won a Webby Award; and

WHEREAS, Color Farm's social impact campaign for *Finding Tamika*, in conjunction with the White House and with Howard University, inspired national media projects and bolstered support for legislative and policy changes to combat "missing white women syndrome." The audio series changed how missing black women and people of color are seen, looked for, and found nationally; and

WHEREAS, Color Farm Media also created educational curricula based off of the Maxine Shaw Effect, in partnership with Microsoft, Discovery Education, Reconstruction, and Langston League, to teach leadership and communication skills and influence attitudes and beliefs regarding career choices, emphasizing the role of representation in media and creating awareness of legal and leadership careers among middle-school and high-school students; and

WHEREAS, Alexander's commitment to social impact has touched the political realm as well, as she was the most traveled surrogate for Hillary Clinton's 2008 and 2016 presidential campaigns to elect the first female U.S. President, which included serving as a delegate from California and returning to her hometown of Philadelphia to deliver a speech at the 2016 Democratic National Convention; and

WHEREAS, In 2008 Alexander was sent to Africa to serve as a Clinton Global Initiative Ambassador alongside President Clinton, and she even designed Hillary’s official campaign poster, which sits as part of the official collection at the Smithsonian Portrait Gallery; and

WHEREAS, Alexander has actively campaigned for Stacey Abrams, Kamala Harris, John Lewis, and Joe Biden among many others at the local and national level; and

WHEREAS, Alexander has testified before the U.S. House of Representatives Judiciary Committee on the topic of diversity in America and media representation of people of color, joined Governor Stacey Abrams in Atlanta for a discussion with the Department of Education as part of the White House Initiative on Racial Equity, and has testified on panels in California and Washington D.C. on the topic of reparations, the subject of her project The Big Payback; and

WHEREAS, Alexander is a sought after speaker as an expert on topics such as representation in media, power and entrepreneurship in media, women’s empowerment, equity in education, mental health, inclusive storytelling for all genre in multi-platforms and political surrogacy, speaking at the 2023 American Federation of Teachers Conference on Racial Justice, the 2023 National Summit on Poverty, The Geena Davis Institute on Gender Representation, Essence Fest, and CBS for Diversity in Entertainment; and

WHEREAS, Alexander is a critical thought leader on racial and gender equity, serving as a board member for One Fair Wage while remaining highly involved with social and racial justice orgs such as The Poor People’s Campaign, Color of Change, NAACP, UNCF, Emily’s List Creative Council, and is an advisor to Planned Parenthood; and

WHEREAS, In recognition of her service to society, social justice, humanitarianism, and social science, Alexander joined the ranks of Dr. Maya Angelou, Phylicia Rashad, Coretta Scott King, Susan Taylor, Ruby Dee, and Barbara Bush when she was awarded an honorary doctorate from Bennett College in 2023, where she served as the school’s commencement speaker that year; and

WHEREAS, That same year, her birthplace of Winslow, Arizona renamed the street she grew up on as “Erika Alexander Way” in honor of her work and career achievements; and

WHEREAS, Alexander has long been regarded not just as an actress but as an activist storyteller, Afrofuturist, humanitarian, entrepreneur, creator, director, and producer whose many talents and commitment to the betterment of humanity have made lasting marks on the arts for forty years and counting; and

WHEREAS, Growing up in Philadelphia was a key component to the success Alexander has gained throughout the years in entertainment, activism, and leadership; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED, BY THE COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF PHILADELPHIA, That Master Street between Broad Street and Carlisle Street shall be also named as “Erika Alexander Way.”

FURTHER RESOLVED, That an Engrossed copy of this Resolution be presented to Erika Alexander as evidence of the true and sincere admiration and respect of this legislative body.