

Legislation Text

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Also naming South Street, between 23rd and 24th Streets, “Lois Fernandez Way”, to honor the life and lasting legacy of Lois Fernandez, founder of the Odunde Festival.

WHEREAS, Lois Fernandez was born in 1936 and raised in South Philadelphia by parents who ingrained in her the importance of community involvement and activism. Ms. Fernandez’s mother was the first African-American woman to be elected committee person in South Philadelphia, according to the Philadelphia SUN. Remembering the beloved South Philadelphia of her childhood, Ms. Fernandez made note of the vibrant and flourishing community that persevered through the depths of the Great Depression; “we were all poor together,” she wrote in her memoir, entitled *Recollections*; and

WHEREAS, The importance of Ms. Fernandez’s African roots to her identity could not be understated, and she chose to celebrate these roots at a time in the nation’s history when few others did. In 1962, Ms. Fernandez adopted an afro hairstyle and endured being ostracized by her coworkers at the Quartermaster Depot for her decision to celebrate her heritage in this way. Out of a continued desire to increase African cultural awareness and appreciation, Ms. Fernandez joined with two relatives and a close friend in 1966 to open Uhuru Hut, a store that specialized in Afrocentric clothing, jewelry, and fine art, that was located at the corner of 23rd and Lombard Streets; and

WHEREAS, Ms. Fernandez was unexpectedly thrust into a legal battle over the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania’s use of the term “illegitimate” on the birth certificates of children born to single mothers, after giving birth to her son Ade’yemi in 1967. After filing a federal lawsuit, Ms. Fernandez was successful in removing the word from Pennsylvania birth certificates, thereby establishing in the eyes of the law that all children born in Pennsylvania are legitimate; and

WHEREAS, The activist spirit that animated Lois Fernandez throughout her life manifested itself in her professional career with the Philadelphia Department of Human Services, where she worked from 1970 to 1988. Ms. Fernandez worked as a parent counselor, as a social worker responsible for placing children into foster care, and as a gang outreach worker who sought to eliminate violence in an era of rampant poverty and crime; and

WHEREAS, Dedicated to lifelong education, Lois Fernandez first received an Associate’s Degree from the Philadelphia Community College before earning a Master’s in Urban Education from Antioch University. Continuing with her mission of service to others, Ms. Fernandez also earned a Parent Education Certification at St. Louis University, an AIDS Training Certification at the City of Philadelphia Coordinating Office on Action AIDS and an Arts Management Certification at the University of Massachusetts. In addition to her work for the Department of Human Services, Ms. Fernandez was a consultant with the Philadelphia School District and Antioch University, and was an adjunct professor in Lincoln University’s master’s program in human services; and

WHEREAS, When Ms. Fernandez began to recognize the need for increased senior housing in South Philadelphia, to allow aging neighbors to stay within the community they had always known, she began to rally

support and funding for the development project that would become Osun Village. When the four-story, sixteen-unit apartment building was opened for low-income seniors in 2010, Council President Anna Verna noted that the plan “would never, never have become reality without the constant, constant persistence of Lois Fernandez”; and

WHEREAS, The legacy left by Lois Fernandez will continue to live on through the Odunde Festival that she founded in 1975 after having been inspired by a similar festival that is celebrated in Nigeria to honor Osun, the traditional Yoruba goddess of the river. While many were skeptical of the festival’s potential, including many in Philadelphia’s African American Community who wondered whether the City would grant permits for an African street festival, Lois Fernandez remained steadfast in her vision for a celebration of traditional African culture in Philadelphia. Thanks to Ms. Fernandez’s dedication and efforts, Odunde has established itself over the last four decades as a Philadelphia cultural institution. In 2017, the street festival that attracted nearly 500,000 attendees from across the region and globe; and

WHEREAS, Lois Fernandez was an inspirational community leader who expended her boundless energy in service to her neighbors and neighborhood. Though the City mourned Ms. Fernandez’s passing in August 2017, Odunde’s annual celebration of African culture will carry forward her mission of greater cultural appreciation and understanding for years to come; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED, BY THE COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF PHILADELPHIA, That South Street, between 23rd and 24th Streets, shall also be named “Lois Fernandez Way”, to honor the life and lasting legacy of Lois Fernandez, founder of the Odunde Festival.

FURTHER RESOLVED, That an Engrossed copy of this resolution be presented to her daughter, Bumi Fernandez, as evidence of the sincere sentiments of this legislative body.