

HOUSE JOINT RESOLUTION NO. 379

Commemorating the life and legacy of Norvel LaFayette Ray Lee.

Agreed to by the House of Delegates, March 8, 2022

Agreed to by the Senate, March 9, 2022

WHEREAS, Norvel LaFayette Ray Lee was a native of Botetourt County who made history both as an Olympic boxer and as a civil rights activist in the 1940s and 1950s; and

WHEREAS, born in Eagle Rock in 1924, Norvel Lee graduated from the Academy Hill School in Fincastle before enlisting with the United States Army Air Forces during World War II; and

WHEREAS, after undergoing flight training at the Tuskegee Army Air Field, Norvel Lee served his country with great courage and valor in the Pacific Theater in the later years of World War II; he then remained a member of the Air Force Reserve Command until the 1980s, retiring as a lieutenant colonel; and

WHEREAS, after World War II, Norvel Lee attended Howard University, acquiring a degree in engineering, and later the former Federal City College, where he earned a master's degree in adult education; and

WHEREAS, while a student at Howard University, Norvel Lee took up the sport of boxing; although he had no previous experience, he quickly excelled and was given a spot on the United States alternate boxing team for the 1948 Olympics; and

WHEREAS, Norvel Lee then won national Golden Gloves titles in 1950, 1951 and 1952, and was a member of the United States team at the 1951 Pan-American Games before winning the gold medal in the light-heavyweight class at the 1952 Olympics in Helsinki; and

WHEREAS, although originally slated as a heavyweight alternate, Norvel Lee lost 15 pounds in two weeks to compete in the light-heavyweight division, going on to become the first African American from the Commonwealth to win Olympic gold; and

WHEREAS, during his boxing career, Norvel Lee notably received the Val Barker Trophy, which is bestowed every four years to the best Olympic boxer across all weight classes, holding the distinction of being the first African American to receive this prestigious honor; and

WHEREAS, in addition to his accomplishments as a boxer, Norvel Lee achieved acclaim as a civil rights activist for his role in challenging the unjust laws and regulations of the Jim Crow era; and

WHEREAS, travelling home by train to Eagle Rock following the 1948 Olympics, Norvel Lee was arrested in Alleghany County for refusing to give up his seat in a whites-only section; he challenged the arrest, and his complaint was ultimately brought before the Supreme Court of Virginia, which ruled in his favor; and

WHEREAS, *Lee v. Commonwealth* was a landmark ruling that would inform the efforts of attorneys working to bring about the end of Jim Crow and its segregationist policies during the civil rights movement of the mid-20th century; and

WHEREAS, despite his success in the ring, Norvel Lee chose not to box professionally, opting instead to embark upon a noble career as an educator and counselor; serving with various prominent institutions over the years, including the former Federal City College, where he established the school's graduate program in the early 1970s; and

WHEREAS, an active and beloved member of the Washington, D.C., community who served many years as president of the National Child Day Care Association, the Diplomat Cab Association, and the Lamond-Riggs Citizens Association, Norvel Lee died on August 19, 1992; and

WHEREAS, preceded in death by his loving wife of 36 years, Leslie, Norvel Lee was survived at the time of his death by his daughters, Deborah and Denise, and their families and by numerous other family members and friends; and

WHEREAS, to honor his contributions to both the Commonwealth and the nation, a historical marker commemorating Norvel Lee's life was established by the Virginia Department of Historic Resources in Botetourt County near his childhood home, while the General Assembly recently named a nearby portion of United States 220 as the Norvel LaFayette Ray Lee Memorial Highway; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED by the House of Delegates, the Senate concurring, That the General Assembly hereby commemorate the life and legacy of Norvel LaFayette Ray Lee on the occasion of the establishment of the Norvel LaFayette Ray Lee Memorial Highway in Botetourt County; and, be it

RESOLVED FURTHER, That the Clerk of the House of Delegates prepare a copy of this resolution for presentation to the family of Norvel LaFayette Ray Lee as an expression of the General Assembly's admiration for his achievements as a boxer, civil rights activist, and educator.