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HOUSE CONCURRENT RESOLUTION No. 4

Originated in House _____ Clerk

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A CONCURRENT RESOLUTION COMMEMORATING THE LIFE AND REMEMBERING THE LEGACY AND DISTINGUISHED SERVICE OF MISSISSIPPI CIVIL RIGHTS ICON VERNON FERDINAND DAHMER, SR., OF HATTIESBURG, MISSISSIPPI, IN ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF HIS PASSING.

WHEREAS, it was once stated by the late Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., that "the ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy," a statement that is very befitting of the life and catalog of service of Mr. Vernon Ferdinand Dahmer, Sr.; and

WHEREAS, January 10, 2016, marks the 50th anniversary of Vernon Dahmer, Sr.'s, death, after he succumbed to the injuries sustained from a fiery attack on the Dahmer Family home on the northern outskirts of Hattiesburg, Mississippi, in the early morning hours of January 10, 2016, by a group of virulent antagonists opposed to his efforts to register African Americans to vote and ensure equality for all races; and

WHEREAS, born on March 10, 1908, the youngest of twelve in the Kelly Settlement of Forrest County, Mississippi, to a Caucasian father, George Washington Dahmer, and a bi-racial mother, Ellen Louvenia Kelly Dahmer; Vernon, whose fair complexion could have allowed him to pass as a Caucasian man, attended Bay Springs High School until the 10th grade, and chose to forego the privilege of living as a Caucasian before embarking upon life as a farmer and a heralding voice for the poor and disenfranchised African-American population of South Mississippi, joining the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and subsequently serving two terms as president of the Forrest County Chapter of the NAACP, even after witnessing his siblings move north, some of whom passed for Caucasian; and

WHEREAS, a shrewd businessman, avid activist and notable figure in Mississippi's vein of the Civil Rights Movement, Mr. Dahmer was not beholden to stigmas and injustices which created hostility among the races, but treated everyone with the same level of dignity and respect irrespective of their color or creed, and died defending his family and the empowering principle of equality, a philosophy that remained the central nexus of his life and works; and

WHEREAS, one who dedicated his entire essence and being to redirecting the plight of an oppressed citizenry whose voices were muted through an elitist and politically induced inability to vote, Mr. Dahmer confronted the power-yielding officials whose

discriminatory practices obstructed African Americans' right to vote through intimidation, literacy exams and poll taxes without trepidation, as made evident by his 1950 decision to join 14 other African-American plaintiffs in bringing suit against then Forrest County Circuit Clerk and registrar of voters for his unconstitutional administration of the voting laws; and

WHEREAS, with the budding friendship and assistance of NAACP Field Secretary Medgar Evers, Mr. Dahmer, then president of the Forrest County Chapter, founded a youth NAACP chapter in Hattiesburg, and continued to be supportive of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), whose aid he personally sought to help assist the voter registration efforts in Hattiesburg, and to whose volunteer workers his farm home suddenly became a refuge, particularly for Curtis Hayes and Hollis Watkins, the first two SNCC volunteers to become visibly present in his concerted efforts to increase African-American voter inclusion and participation in the election processes of Forrest County; and

WHEREAS, an impassioned visionary and optimist for equality, the Dahmer's farm was used for voter registration projects, and eventually received the approval of the Forrest County Sheriff, who also served as the county's tax collector, to keep a voter registration book in his grocery store, which enabled those African Americans with a burning desire to register to vote, to do so, and Mr. Dahmer publicly announced his willingness to pay the

poll taxes for the right to vote for those individuals unable to afford the cost of doing so themselves; and

WHEREAS, a great humanitarian by every definition of the term, Mr. Dahmer's tireless and zealous advocacy for voter equality placed him in an unappealing light to those who opposed his efforts, which required him and his wife, Ellie, to sleep in shifts throughout the night after becoming the target of numerous vicious death threats over the span of several years, until the dreaded events of January 10, 1966, became a stark reality in the form of a living nightmare that forever changed their lives and gripped the Hattiesburg community as news of the heinous act perpetrated under the cloak of darkness at the Dahmer's residence sent shockwaves rippling throughout the state and nation; and

WHEREAS, in the wake of the horrific tragedy, the Hattiesburg Chamber of Commerce, under the leadership of William Carey College President Dr. Ralph Noonkester and Bob Beech of the Hattiesburg Ministers' Project had led a community effort to rebuild the Dahmer home with the assistance of local and state businesses such as the Masonite Corporation, Alexander Materials and Frierson Building Materials that donated materials, local unions that donated their services, and students from the University of Southern Mississippi who volunteered unskilled labor; and

WHEREAS, Mr. Vernon Dahmer, Sr.'s, diligence in championing the advocacy for voter's rights with unyielding fervor unintentionally branded him martyrdom, and for his personal

sacrifice, his name is included among those of 40 martyrs, 19 of whom received their heavenly summons to the vanguard of civil rights immortality, to be engraved upon the Civil Rights Memorial outside the Southern Poverty Law Center's office in Montgomery, Alabama; and

WHEREAS, the slain civil rights leader remains a model today, as his mantra that: "Every man needs to do his own thinking. If you don't vote, you don't count," continues to provide meaningful direction to those called to service of mankind and a harkening voice of reasoning from the grave to remember the valiant and sometimes deadly undertakings of those who were forerunners for the privilege to vote that all Americans now experience; and

WHEREAS, posthumously, Dahmer's legacy has been commemorated by the City of Hattiesburg with the naming of a street and a park in his honor, the erection and dedication of a memorial in the park bearing his namesake on July 26, 1986, and on February 3, 2007, William Carey University announced the inclusion of the Vernon Dahmer Collection at its Hattiesburg campus, in recognition of Dahmer's heroic contributions to the Civil Rights Movement, and funded in part by a grant from the Mississippi Humanities Council; and

WHEREAS, in continuing to carry the torch for political and social equality initially ignited and shouldered by her husband Vernon, Mrs. Ellie Dahmer, after having been first elected in 1992, served more than a decade as Election Commissioner of

District 2, Forrest County, the very district in which her husband gave his life for his voting rights advocacy without ever experiencing the voting opportunity; and

WHEREAS, it is the policy of this Legislature to pay homage to such a selfless individual as Mr. Dahmer, and it is with solemn reverence and humility that we honor and cherish the memory of this giant of an individual and patron citizen of Mississippi, whose life evidences the fulfillment of a servant's response to a people in need:

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED BY THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES OF THE STATE OF MISSISSIPPI, THE SENATE CONCURRING THEREIN, That we do hereby commemorate the life and remember the legacy and distinguished service of Mississippi Civil Rights icon Vernon Ferdinand Dahmer, Sr., of Hattiesburg, Mississippi, in acknowledgment of the 50th anniversary of his passing.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, That copies of this resolution be furnished to Mrs. Ellie Dahmer and the surviving Dahmer children, forwarded to the Mississippi Department of Archives and History and to the members of the Capitol Press Corps.

ADOPTED BY THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
January 26, 2016

SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

ADOPTED BY THE SENATE
January 28, 2016

PRESIDENT OF THE SENATE