

Senate Resolution No. 1798

BY: Senator CLEARE

HONORING Constance Baker Motley posthumously for
special recognition in observance of Black History
Month

WHEREAS, It is with profound intent that this Legislative Body is moved to pay homage to a woman of indomitable faith and dedication whose purposeful life and accomplishments will forever stand as a paradigm and inspiration for others; and

WHEREAS, It is the custom of this Legislative Body to give acclaim to individuals of great character whose lives exemplify the highest ideals of humanity; and

WHEREAS, Attendant to such concern and in full accord with its long-standing traditions, this Legislative Body is justly proud to honor Constance Baker Motley posthumously for special recognition in observance of Black History Month; and

WHEREAS, Black History Month is a time to reflect on the struggles and victories of African Americans throughout our country's history and to recognize their numerous valuable contributions to the protection of our democratic society in times of war and in peace; and

WHEREAS, An unlikely civil rights hero, Constance Baker Motley was an African American who grew up near Yale University; she did not personally experience overt racism until late in high school and as a young person she was almost totally unaware of black history; and

WHEREAS, From the late 1940s through the early 1960s, Constance Baker Motley played a pivotal role in the fight to end racial segregation, putting her own safety at risk in one racial dispute after another; and

WHEREAS, Constance Baker Motley was the first African American woman to argue a case before the Supreme Court, and the first to serve as a federal judge; and

WHEREAS, As a front-line lawyer for the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Constance Baker Motley personally led the litigation that integrated the Universities of Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi among others, overcoming Southern governors who literally barred the door to African American students; and

WHEREAS, Furthermore, she opened up schools and parks to African Americans, and successfully championed the rights of minorities to protest peacefully; and

WHEREAS, The daughter of working-class immigrants from the West Indies, Constance Baker Motley could not afford higher education; while speaking at a community center, however, she impressed New Haven

philanthropist Clarence Blakeslee and he agreed to pay for her education; and

WHEREAS, This one act of kindness had a lasting impact on Constance Baker Motley who learned the importance of compassion and developed a belief that one committed person can make a difference in the world; and

WHEREAS, In 1946, Constance Baker Motley graduated from Columbia Law School, during which time she worked for the NAACP's legal staff under future Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall; and

WHEREAS, By the time she left the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund in 1965, Constance Baker Motley had personally argued 10 Supreme Court cases (winning nine), and assisted in nearly 60 cases that reached the high court; and

WHEREAS, Along the way, Constance Baker Motley experienced countless courtroom delays and indignities yet remained steadfast, calm and strong, even as some judges turned their backs when she spoke; she truly rejected any notion that her race or sex would bar her success in life; and

WHEREAS, While juggling desegregation cases, Constance Baker Motley occasionally represented Martin Luther King, Jr and in perhaps her most famous case, she helped James Meredith gain enrollment at the University of Mississippi; and

WHEREAS, In 1965, Constance Baker Motley entered elected politics, becoming the first African American woman in the New York State Senate, and the first woman elected Manhattan Borough President; one year later, President Johnson appointed her to the Southern District of New York; and

WHEREAS, Constance Baker Motley published an autobiography, "Equal Justice Under Law" in 1998; and

WHEREAS, Throughout her illustrious legal career, Constance Baker Motley tirelessly and courageously lifted her voice higher and higher, arguing cases in hostile towns, against hostile lawyers, and before hostile judges in the pursuit of equal justice; and

WHEREAS, Constance Baker was a woman of extraordinary intelligence, fortitude and personal presence, and her desire to have an impact in the world will continue to inspire African American women for generations to come; and

WHEREAS, Our society is greatly benefited by the purposeful efforts of individuals who unite for the cause of improving the quality of life for others, and who proactively work toward the goal of dignity for all; and

WHEREAS, It is the sense of this Legislative Body that when individuals of such noble aims and accomplishments are brought to our attention, it is appropriate to publicly proclaim and commend those individuals for the edification and emulation of others; now, therefore,

be it

RESOLVED, That this Legislative Body pause in its deliberations to honor Constance Baker Motley posthumously for special recognition in observance of Black History Month; and be it further

RESOLVED, That a copy of this Resolution, suitably engrossed, be transmitted to the family of Constance Baker Motley.