

BY: Senator COONEY

HONORING the life and legacy Belen Colon, a champion of civil, voting, and human rights, and a tireless advocate for the voiceless

WHEREAS, Belen Colon was born in 1938 in Cayey, a valley in the central mountain range of the Island of Puerto Rico; her undying passion for democracy kicked in shortly after Congress granted Puerto Rico self-governing status in 1948; and

WHEREAS, At just ten years old, Belen Colon joined the Youth Political Party, a subsidiary of the larger organization called the Popular Party, "Partido POPULAR" (PPD); she recruited nearly 100 students in her Get Out to Vote (GOTV) efforts; her movement was the first of its kind and subsequently, Puerto Rico elected its first Governor, PPD candidate, Luis Munoz Marin; and

WHEREAS, In 1963, shortly after her mother's death, Belen Colon moved to Manhattan, New York to join her sister; during this time, she reconnected with Don Gabriel Vazquez, a family friend from her hometown of Cayey in Puerto Rico; she married Gabriel and together they moved to Rochester, New York; and

WHEREAS, Upon settling in Rochester, Belen Colon immediately noticed a disparity in education, housing, employment, medical and language access and began to organize the Latino movement; and

WHEREAS, Lovingly referred to as "The Mayor of North Clinton Avenue," Belen Colon established block clubs and began working with local civil rights activists including Father Laurence Tracy, Minister Franklin Florence, and Reverend Lewis Stewart among others locally, to help address issues impacting Latino and black communities; and

WHEREAS, When Dona Belen Colon's application to register to vote was denied in 1965, she tirelessly fought alongside national heroes like John Lewis to pass The Voting Rights Act of 1965 which did not allow for the discrimination against any American regardless of their language, color, religion, or gender; and

WHEREAS, Belen Colon made it her priority and mission to register and educate as many Latino and African American citizens in the City of Rochester; for more than 50 years, she walked door to door registering residents and mobilizing the community to address inequities, giving a

voice to voters on issues important to their futures; and

WHEREAS, Belen Colon was instrumental in pushing local utilities companies such as Rochester Gas and Electric and Rochester Telephone Company, as well as property managers and banks, to have all literature translated to Spanish; she also worked with New York State to establish the same priority on language access materials in Spanish, particularly

the Lemon Law and consumer laws impacting Latinos in the community; and

WHEREAS, Understanding the importance of education for future generations, Belen Colon became active with the Rochester City School District (RCSD); she helped author the "Aurora Report," a legal binding report that ensured Bilingual Education in the Rochester City School District and worked to make certain it remained intact and fully funded; she also went on to work for the Rochester City School District as an instructional paraprofessional and assistant librarian, retiring after 30 years of dedicated service; and

WHEREAS, Passionate about literacy, Belen Colon went on to start the North Clinton Avenue Book Club and gifted over 100 books to inner city children; she was instrumental in the naming of Rochester City School District No. 8, to be named after her good friend, Baseball Hall of Famer and hero, Roberto Clemente; and

WHEREAS, With a steadfast and unwavering commitment to her community, Belen Colon was an active member of Adelante Title I Committee, the first RCSD bilingual education committee, as well as the Bilingual Education Committee, the Special Education Taskforce, and the Superintendents Parent Committee; she also often organized parent trips to Albany to advocate on behalf of the Rochester City School District; and

WHEREAS, A strong woman of indomitable faith and dedication, Belen Colon's final project was the establishment of "Friends of St. Michaels," a nonprofit organization dedicated to saving the church which was at the heart of the Latino community in one of New York State's most impoverished communities; the church represents hope for a community abandoned and forgotten, and this extraordinary woman's tireless efforts successfully saved its doors from permanently closing; and

WHEREAS, On November 12, 2022, Belen Colon passed away at the age of 84; she is survived by her children, Gabriel (Rachel) Vazquez, Mateo (Bonnie) Vazquez, Mercedes Vazquez-Simmons, Borgen Vargas, Norma Diamond, Abigail Gonzalez, Rosin Rivera, and Devon Vazquez; 11 grandchildren; and 11 great-grandchildren; as well as many nieces, nephews, and friends; and

WHEREAS, Belen Colon's infinite selflessness and benevolence will shine on through her family's vivid and happy memories; her insight and strength will forever serve as a beacon of love, light and hope to the countless lives she touched; and

WHEREAS, Armed with a humanistic spirit and imbued with a sense of compassion, Belen Colon leaves behind a legacy which will long endure the passage of time and will remain as a comforting memory to all who were privileged to have known and loved such an amazing woman; she will be deeply missed and truly merits the grateful tribute of this Legislative Body; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED, That this Legislative Body pause in its deliberations to honor the life and legacy Belen Colon, a champion of civil, voting, and human rights, and a tireless advocate for the voiceless; and be it

further

RESOLVED, That a copy of this Resolution, suitably engrossed, be transmitted to the family of Belen Colon.