**A** **HOUSE RESOLUTION**

TO RECOGNIZE THOMAS WALTER GAITHER FOR HIS COURAGE AND DETERMINATION AS ONE OF THE “FRIENDSHIP NINE,” TO ACKNOWLEDGE THE HARDSHIPS IMPOSED ON HIM AS A RESULT OF HIS CONVICTION FOR SITTING AT A WHITES‑ONLY LUNCH COUNTER IN 1961 DURING THE CIVIL RIGHTS ERA, AND TO HONOR HIS SACRIFICE IN CHOOSING IMPRISONMENT OVER A FINE AS THE PRICE OF PROTEST AT THAT EVENT AS HE TOOK A STAND FOR EQUAL RIGHTS FOR ALL.

Whereas, on January 31, 1961, Thomas Walter Gaither joined nine students from Rock Hill’s Friendship Junior College to picket McCrory’s Five and Dime department store in downtown Rock Hill in a peaceful protest against racial segregation. They walked in, took seats at the lunch counter, and ordered hamburgers, soft drinks, and coffee; and

Whereas, this form of protest against segregation laws, known as a “sit‑in,” started the year before in Greensboro, North Carolina, and spread throughout the South. These young men, as well as other Rock Hill demonstrators, already had been arrested for trespassing several times during 1960, and each time they were released after paying bail. In January 1961, however, they decided that if they were arrested, they would not accept bail but would serve their sentences thus giving birth to the “Jail, No Bail” movement. They were convicted of trespassing with attorney Ernest Finney by their side. Finney would later serve with honor as Chief Justice of the South Carolina Supreme Court; and

Whereas, the convictions of Thomas Gaither and his companions stood for more than five decades until Wednesday, January 28, 2015, when the court vacated the fifty‑four‑year‑old ruling in a Rock Hill courtroom in an attempt to right a past wrong against these Civil Rights’ heroes. In an unprecedented ruling, the judge ordered that the record not be expunged, although the convictions were vacated and dismissed with prejudice, so that the history of the courageous actions of these men would forever be preserved and their great sacrifices on behalf of Civil Rights would not be forgotten; and

Whereas, a graduate of Claflin College, Thomas Gaither was a field secretary for the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) who traveled to Rock Hill to help organize the protests. He is the only protester who did not attend Friendship. In the summer of 1961, he helped organize the Freedom Riders in the South, and then he served in the United States Army. After a long and fulfilling career as a professor of biology, he is now retired and lives in Pennsylvania; and

Whereas, the members of the South Carolina House of Representatives are grateful for the courage and tenacity of this brave son of South Carolina and for the impact he has had on the Civil Rights Movement in our State and across the nation. Now, therefore,

Be it resolved by the House of Representatives:

That the members of the House of Representatives of the State of South Carolina, by this resolution, recognize Thomas Walter Gaither for his courage and determination as one of the “Friendship Nine,” acknowledge the hardships imposed on him as a result of his conviction for sitting at a whites‑only lunch counter in 1961 during the Civil Rights Era, and honor his sacrifice in choosing imprisonment over a fine as the price of protest at that event as he took a stand for equal rights for all.

Be it further resolved that a copy of this resolution be provided to Thomas Walter Gaither.

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