

SENATE RESOLUTION NO. 95

BY SENATOR DUPLESSIS

A RESOLUTION

To express the sincere and heartfelt condolences of the Senate of the Legislature of Louisiana upon the death of Kenneth "Biggy" Johnston.

WHEREAS, it is with immense sadness and profound regret that the Senate of the Legislature of Louisiana has learned of the death of Kenneth "Biggy" Johnston; and

WHEREAS, Mr. Johnston was drafted and served his country in the Vietnam War; and

WHEREAS, upon his return to Louisiana, and like many others who served in the war, Biggy struggled with the trauma he witnessed and experienced, and with addiction which eventually prompted his incarceration at the Louisiana State Penitentiary in 1974; and

WHEREAS, while incarcerated, Biggy educated himself in the practice of law in order to assist his immediate community in navigating the court system, including filing petitions against the nonunanimous jury system; and

WHEREAS, Biggy co-founded the Angola Special Civics Project with Norris Henderson and this group worked with the Louisiana Legislature to pass Act 790 of the 1990 Regular Session to create Louisiana's first life sentence-parole law, years after this eligibility was retroactively taken from offenders during Louisiana's "tough-on-crime" era; and

WHEREAS, Biggy was released through the mechanism he created and became a paralegal upon returning to New Orleans; and

WHEREAS, in 2003, the Angola Special Civics Project was reconvened outside of prison under the name VOTE to organize, educate, and mobilize the community impacted by what had become the most incarcerated state in the world; and

WHEREAS, in 2016, after several years of testifying on behalf of voting rights for himself and tens of thousands of others, Biggy became the lead plaintiff in "*VOTE v. Louisiana*", a lawsuit to restore voting rights; and

WHEREAS, in the 2018 Regular Session of the Legislature, Biggy was instrumental to the passage of Act 636, restoring voting rights to all people on probation and those who have been on parole over five years, including himself, and on the Act's effective date (March 1, 2019), he became the first person on parole to register to vote since the extension of voting rights to black men; and

WHEREAS, also in 2018, Biggy was part of the Non-Unanimous Jury Coalition, and helped win passage of a constitutional amendment that ended the Jim Crow practice under which he was convicted; and

WHEREAS, Biggy lived to see Voice of the Experienced (VOTE), the progeny of the Angola Special Civics Project, create three chapters, massively grow its staff, play a lead role in criminal justice reform, become nationally recognized, open multiple reentry houses, launch the Formerly Incarcerated Transition (FIT) Clinic, and purchase its own building; and

WHEREAS, Biggy Johnston leaves behind a wonderful community of people, especially his VOTE family, his life's work, his Peer Support Group that meets twice per month, and his loving siblings and children. Johnston was a generous, kind, and cheerful man of small stature yet truly worthy of the name "Biggy"; he will truly be missed, but will never be forgotten.

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the Senate of the Legislature of Louisiana does hereby express sincere and heartfelt condolences on the death of Kenneth "Biggy" Johnston, does hereby further recognize Mr. Johnston's unrelenting dedication to Louisiana, and does hereby extend sincerest wishes that his family, friends, and loved ones may find comfort in their shared memories of his life.

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PRESIDENT OF THE SENATE