SENATE RESOLUTION

8635

By Senators Braun, Holy, C. Wilson, Mullet, Warnick, L. Wilson, Rivers, Boehnke, Lovick, Salomon, Valdez, Fortunato, Wellman, Muzzall, Keiser, Hunt, Wagoner, Dozier, Schoesler, Torres, Padden, King, Hawkins, Gildon, Short, and Hasegawa

WHEREAS, Bill Russell was one of the greatest basketball players of all time and was a trailblazer for the National Basketball Association and basketball as a sport; and

WHEREAS, At the peak of his Hall of Fame athletic career, Bill Russell was also a leading advocate for civil rights who inspired future generations of NBA players to promote social justice; and

WHEREAS, Bill Russell was born February 12, 1934, in Monroe, Louisiana, where his family faced the racism common in the segregated South, and when Bill was eight years old his family moved to Oakland, California; and

WHEREAS, Bill Russell accepted a scholarship to play basketball at the University of San Francisco, where he had two other Black players as teammates, and while they were often targets of racial jabs, Russell said he never permitted himself to be a victim; and

WHEREAS, While Bill Russell played at USF the team, called the Dons, went to two NCAA championships, 1955 and 1956, and he also starred on the gold medal-winning United States basketball team at the 1956 Olympic Games in Melbourne, Australia; and

WHEREAS, In one of the most important sports transactions in American history, Bill Russell was the second overall pick in the 1956 NBA Draft, being drafted to the St. Louis Hawks then traded to the Boston Celtics; and

WHEREAS, From 1956 to 1969, Bill Russell led the Celtics to eight consecutive NBA championships from 1959 to 1966, with his court savvy and defensive skills changing how the game was played; and

WHEREAS, The 6-foot-10-inch center earned the nickname "Secretary of Defense," winning the title of NBA's most valuable player five times and being named an All-Star 12 times; and

WHEREAS, In 1966 he became the first Black head coach in the NBA, both coaching and playing for the Celtics until 1969; and

WHEREAS, Former U.S. Senator Bill Bradley, who as a member of the New York Knicks played against Bill Russell in the 1960s, viewed him as "the smartest player ever to play the game and the epitome of a team leader"; and

WHEREAS, In 1972 the NBA retired his number 6 jersey, and it remains the only number to become retired league-wide; and

WHEREAS, Bill Russell was hailed in 1996 as one of the NBA's 50 greatest players, and in 2009, the trophy for the Most Valuable Player of the NBA Finals was named in his honor; and

WHEREAS, Standing alongside his many achievements on the hardwood are his efforts as a civil rights activist; and

WHEREAS, In 1963 he took part in the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom and was front row at Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous "I Have a Dream" speech; and

WHEREAS, Bill Russell also spent time in Mississippi after civil rights activist Medgar Evers was murdered, and would later create an integrated basketball camp with Evers' brother, Charles, in Jackson, Mississippi; and

WHEREAS, Bill Russell was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2011 by President Barack Obama, for standing up for the rights and dignity of all; and

WHEREAS, Bill Russell's ties to the state of Washington date to 1973, when he became the general manager and coach for the Seattle SuperSonics; and

WHEREAS, Bill Russell called Mercer Island home from 1973 until his passing on July 31, 2022, having chosen the community because of the quality of its school system;

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, That the Washington State Senate honor the life and accomplishments of longtime Washington resident Bill Russell both inside and outside the arena, and extend its condolences to his widow Jeannine and his three children, William Russell Jr., Jacob Russell, and Karen Kenyatta Russell.