

SENATE JOINT RESOLUTION 55

By Dickerson

A RESOLUTION to honor the memory of John Lawrence Seigenthaler of Nashville.

WHEREAS, the members of this General Assembly were greatly saddened to learn of the passing of John Lawrence Seigenthaler; and

WHEREAS, Mr. Seigenthaler was an exemplary public servant and consummate professional who worked assiduously to improve the quality of life for his fellow citizens in numerous capacities; and

WHEREAS, a man of great convictions, John Seigenthaler fulfilled a variety of roles as a journalist, Kennedy administration advisor, civil rights activist, and author, who earned the respect of his peers and readers alike for his dedication to promoting justice; and

WHEREAS, born in Nashville on July 27, 1927, to John L. and Mary Brew Seigenthaler, John Lawrence Seigenthaler, Jr., was the oldest of eight siblings; he attended Father Ryan High School and graduated in 1945 with aspirations to be a teacher; and

WHEREAS, a proud veteran of the United States Air Force, Mr. Seigenthaler completed three years of military service before returning home in the spring of 1949; and

WHEREAS, John Seigenthaler attended George Peabody College for Teachers before he accepted a job offer from his uncle, Walter Seigenthaler, as a reporter for *The Tennessean*, where he made a name for himself as a reporter who could get any story; and

WHEREAS, Mr. Seigenthaler pioneered news coverage of the Civil Rights Movement when other Southern newspapers refused; exposed corruption in organized labor unions, specifically Jimmy Hoffa and the Teamsters; and uncovered miscarriages of justice in local and state government; and

WHEREAS, in 1954, he saved a suicidal man from taking his own life by pulling the man from the ledge of a bridge over the Cumberland River, a bridge which is now named after the renowned journalist; and

WHEREAS, John Seigenthaler's exposé on the Teamsters union garnered the attention of his friend, Senator Robert Kennedy, who, in 1959, asked Mr. Seigenthaler to edit his book on the subject, *The Enemy Within*; and

WHEREAS, in 1959, Mr. Seigenthaler completed a Neiman Fellowship at Harvard University and he was promoted to *The Tennessean's* assistant city editor position and later to city editor and special assignment reporter; and

WHEREAS, during a private meeting at Robert and Ethel Kennedy's home in 1960, Mr. Seigenthaler was asked by President John F. Kennedy to become a member of his inner circle, and in 1961, he was appointed as the United States Department of Justice aide to Attorney General Robert Kennedy; and

WHEREAS, in May of 1961, John Seigenthaler traveled to Montgomery, Alabama, as a Justice Department representative to ensure that police protection was provided for the Freedom Riders between Birmingham and Montgomery; when local police failed to protect the young protestors, violence erupted and Mr. Seigenthaler was assaulted with a lead pipe and beaten while he attempted to aid a young lady, an incident for which Robert Kennedy later thanked him for "using his head"; and

WHEREAS, John Seigenthaler left the Justice Department in 1962 after he was named editor of *The Tennessean* at the age of 34; in this position, he fought for open government records and meetings; assigned reporters to probe the conditions of the Central State mental health hospital, city workhouses, nursing homes, and migrant worker camps; and assigned a reporter to eighteen months of undercover work in the Ku Klux Klan; and

WHEREAS, in 1968, he once again took a leave of absence from the newspaper to run Robert Kennedy's presidential campaign in Northern California; regrettably, during the California

primary, on June 4, 1968, Robert Kennedy was assassinated and Mr. Seigenthaler served as a pallbearer at his funeral; and

WHEREAS, John Seigenthaler became publisher of *The Tennessean* in 1973, making him the newspaper's editor and publisher; in this joint position he focused on legislative issues, including tax hikes and education reform; and

WHEREAS, after Gannett Company purchased *The Tennessean* in 1979, he successfully fought the new owners for autonomy in editorial and operational matters; later, the company launched a new national periodical and asked Mr. Seigenthaler to lend his expertise to its editorial pages; and

WHEREAS, he was hired in 1982 as *USA Today's* editorial page editor and director, a job he executed while continuing to fulfill his duties at *The Tennessean*; during this time, he traveled between the newspapers' offices in Nashville and Washington, D.C. weekly; and

WHEREAS, in 1991, John Seigenthaler retired from both *The Tennessean* and *USA Today* and founded the First Amendment Center, an institute that promotes freedom of the press, on the campus of Vanderbilt University; and

WHEREAS, after retirement, he continued to serve on journalism panels and give speeches on press freedom; in addition, he led the presidential debates during the 2012 election cycle; and

WHEREAS, throughout his storied career, Mr. Seigenthaler authored four books: *A Search for Justice*, *An Honorable Profession*, *The Year Called Watergate*, and *James K. Polk*; he served as a television host on the Nashville Public Television program, *A Word on Words*; and

WHEREAS, John Seigenthaler was also deeply devoted to his family, and he always endeavored to remain true to family values of the highest order; and

WHEREAS, Mr. Seigenthaler enjoyed the loving companionship of his wife, Dolores Watson, whom he married in 1955, and was the proud parent of John Michael Seigenthaler, father-in-law of Kerry Brock, and grandfather of Jack; and

WHEREAS, Mr. Seigenthaler leaves behind an indelible legacy of integrity and probity in public life, compassion and loyalty in private life, and diligence and dedication in all his chosen endeavors; and

WHEREAS, it is fitting that this General Assembly should pause to remember the bountiful life of this exceptional public servant and human being; now, therefore,

BE IT RESOLVED BY THE SENATE OF THE ONE HUNDRED NINTH GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE STATE OF TENNESSEE, THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES CONCURRING, that we honor the memory of John Lawrence Seigenthaler, reflecting fondly upon his impeccable character and his stalwart commitment to living the examined life with courage and conviction.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that we express our sympathy and offer our condolences to the family of Mr. Seigenthaler.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that an appropriate copy of this resolution be prepared for presentation with this final clause omitted from such copy.