

SR-172, As Adopted by Senate, September 27, 2012

Senators Schuitmaker, Robertson, Hildenbrand, Gregory, Hunter, Hood, Smith, Young, Meekhof, Richardville, Nofs, Emmons, Jansen, Moolenaar, Walker, Pappageorge and Jones offered the following resolution:

Senate Resolution No. 172.

A resolution proclaiming October 20, 2012, as Willis Ward Day in the state of Michigan.

Whereas, Willis Ward attended Northwestern High School in Detroit, where he played football and was one of the best track athletes in the country, being named High School Athlete of the Year as a junior; and

Whereas, Willis Ward attended the University of Michigan, where he continued to excel at athletics. He won numerous track and field championships and was the first African-American football player at the University in 40 years, becoming close friends and roommates with fellow player Gerald Ford; and

Whereas, Willis Ward played football at the University of Michigan during the pinnacle of Jim Crow laws. He was benched for a game against Georgia Tech on October 20, 1934, as Georgia Tech refused to play against a team that fielded a black athlete. His friend and teammate Gerald Ford agreed to play only after Ward personally asked him to; and

Whereas, This was the one and only time in Michigan football history that a player was benched solely because of his race, yet Willis handled the situation with incredible grace and class. Michigan defeated Georgia Tech 9-2 in its only win of the season; and

Whereas, He decided to forego the 1936 Olympics in Berlin--even though he was certain to excel, having beaten Jesse Owens in events the previous year--because he did not want to risk being similarly persecuted by Adolph Hitler; and

Whereas, After college, he took a job at Ford Motor Company as head of the Civil Rights Division, becoming the highest ranking African-American employee at the company answering only to Henry Ford himself; and

Whereas, During World War II, Willis Ward served his country as a lieutenant in the United States Army; and

Whereas, After the war, he enrolled at the Detroit College of Law and subsequently worked in the Wayne County Prosecutor's Office handling civil rights discrimination cases. In 1960, he became chairman of the Michigan Public Service Commission and in 1973, was appointed to the Wayne County Probate Court, becoming the first African-American probate court judge in Wayne County; now, therefore, be it

Resolved by the Senate, That we hereby proclaim October 20, 2012, as Willis Ward Day in the state of Michigan--exactly 78 years after he was benched for a Georgia Tech game--in recognition of his many accomplishments, steadfast character, and significant contributions to our state; and be it further

Resolved, That a copy of this resolution be transmitted to the family of Willis Ward and the University of Michigan as evidence of our highest esteem.