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By:  Anchia H.R. No. 969

R E S O L U T I O N

WHEREAS, The year 2019 marks the 10th anniversary of the passage of the Tim Cole Act by the 81st Texas Legislature, and this milestone provides a fitting opportunity to honor the memory of those esteemed Texans who dedicated their lives to improving the state's criminal justice system; and

WHEREAS, Signed into law by Governor Rick Perry in 2009, the Tim Cole Act increased financial compensation for the wrongly imprisoned; the legislation is named in honor of Timothy Cole, the first person in the country to be exonerated posthumously through DNA testing; a veteran of the U.S. Army and former Texas Tech student, Mr. Cole died in prison in 1999; his family, the crime victim, and the Innocence Project of Texas worked together to clear his name, and he received the state's first posthumous pardon in 2010; five years later, his alma mater presented his family with an honorary degree in law and social justice to recognize Mr. Cole's sacrifice and contributions to reforms in the state's criminal justice system; the city of Lubbock now has a statue dedicated to his memory, and a Texas Historical Commission marker is in place near his gravesite in Fort Worth, his hometown; and

WHEREAS, The Innocence Project of Texas was founded in 2006 by attorneys Mike Ware and Jeff Blackburn to provide pro bono investigative and legal services to indigent Texans convicted of crimes they did not commit; since its inception, the organization and its board members have won the freedom of 25 men and women; among those cleared were three men, now deceased, who devoted themselves to helping others still wrongfully incarcerated; and

WHEREAS, On March 28, 2019, staff, board members, exonerees, and volunteers of the Innocence Project of Texas are visiting the State Capitol for the inaugural Innocence Project of Texas Advocacy Day, bringing broader statewide attention to the need for criminal justice reform and to the contributions of exonerees who have passed away; and

WHEREAS, James Lee Woodard of Dallas County was exonerated in 2009 following 27 years in prison, and while working on behalf of criminal justice reform, he donated $100,000 to study the causes of wrongful convictions, including faulty eyewitness identification; he passed away in October 2012; and

WHEREAS, Billy James Smith of Dallas County, exonerated in 2006 following two decades in prison, accepted speaking engagements across the country to address criminal justice reform; in addition, he testified before the U.S. Congress and the Texas Legislature on numerous pieces of legislation; in the spring of 2007, he spoke passionately at a public meeting of the Dallas County Commissioners Court asking that they fund what would become the first Conviction Integrity Unit in the country; the unit's ensuing successes gave rise to conviction integrity units all over the United States; he passed away in March 2017; and

WHEREAS, Johnnie Lindsey of Dallas County, imprisoned for 26 years before his exoneration in 2008, became a private investigator and process server while working to free the innocent; he died in February 2018; and

WHEREAS, A fourth man, Ronald Gene Taylor of Harris County, served 13 years in prison until 2008, when he was exonerated by the work of the Innocence Project based in New York; he dedicated himself to criminal justice reform at the state and national level until his death in September 2018; and

WHEREAS, These brave and resolute Texans set an inspiring example through their tremendous commitment to criminal justice reform, and their legacy will long endure; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED, That the House of Representatives of the 86th Texas Legislature hereby commemorate the 10th anniversary of the Tim Cole Act, pay tribute to the lives of Timothy Cole, James Lee Woodard, Johnnie Lindsey, Billy James Smith, and Ronald Gene Taylor, and recognize the ongoing work of the Innocence Project of Texas to right the wrongs that have occurred through mistakes made in our criminal justice system.