

SENATE JOINT RESOLUTION 228
By Jackson

A RESOLUTION To honor and commend Jim Ayers for his
excellence in business and invaluable
contributions to the citizens of Decatur County.

WHEREAS, It is fitting that this General Assembly should pause in its deliberations to specially recognize those noteworthy citizens who have altruistically sought the greater good of their fellow man; and

WHEREAS, Jim Ayers of Decatur County is one such estimable individual; in the Fall of 1999, he launched the Ayers Foundation Scholars Program, a program which has made it possible for any Decatur County student who so desires to attend college; and

WHEREAS, A native of Parsons, Mr. Ayers learned the value of hard work at an early age; as a child, he was often seen walking on the Parsons sidewalks with a wooden shoeshine kit, offering 10-cent shines; at age five, he landed his first job, helping his father load sacks of soybeans to be sold to farmers; and

WHEREAS, During the summers of his youth, he hauled hay at his aunt's farm in Hurricane Mills, and he later was quite successful as a Bible salesman for Southwestern Co.

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Through these experiences, he developed much of his tremendous business acumen that has served him so well, but the greatest contributions to his future were made by his loving parents; and

WHEREAS, Jim Ayer's father owned and operated a 20-employee sawmill, and his mother operated a flower shop and managed the couple's duplexes while raising three children; the Ayers were the owners of an unsurpassed work ethic, which they passed along to their son, and, although neither were college educated, they believed deeply in the value of education and strove to ensure that their son would have the educational opportunities with which they had not been blessed in their own lives; and

WHEREAS, After graduating from Parsons High School in 1961, Mr. Ayers matriculated at Memphis State University; in 1965, his parents' dreams came to fruition as he completed his degree in business administration and took a position with Ortho Pharmaceutical Company; and

WHEREAS, Mr. Ayers quickly displayed his considerable business savvy, and, in 1970, he was hired as a Controller with Care Inn Nursing Home Division of William Bond, Inc; this enterprising young man was quickly elevated first to Vice President and then to Chief Operating Officer, and, within just a couple of years, he managed to pull the company out of a hole and make it a solvent entity; and

WHEREAS, Following the company's sale in 1971, this budding entrepreneur acquired the necessary capital to start his own company, which focused on the management of nursing homes that had been foreclosed by the Department of Housing and Urban Development; in 1976, he sold that company and founded Ayers and Associates, a company that later became American Health Centers and led Mr. Ayers to industry-wide prominence; and

WHEREAS, By 1974, Jim Ayers had moved back to Parsons, and the relationship between Mr. Ayers and his hometown has proven to be most beneficial to each party; he used the proceeds from the sale of his first company to build a 65-bed nursing home that later grew to 200 beds and served as the foundation of an extremely successful nursing home empire; and

WHEREAS, In search of new challenges, Mr. Ayers sold his 88% share of American Health Centers in the mid-1990s; always conscious of his community's welfare, he utilized the Employee Stock Ownership Plan to ensure that local employees would not lose their jobs or be forced to transfer out of the area; and

WHEREAS, In the years that have followed, Mr. Ayers has continued to enjoy remarkable success in his business endeavors; his Midstate investments include Community Care Inc., Hallmark Jeep/Eagle, Crown Ford, Council Capital Management, and Community South Bank of Columbia, of which he is a major shareholder and Chairman; and

WHEREAS, Having conquered the nursing home business, this extremely talented individual turned his attentions to the banking industry, and his skill and knowledge have proved to be just as applicable to that business; he is the sole owner of First Bank, which is headquartered in Lexington and has branches in Parsons, Jackson, Camden, Linden, Dickson, and Huntington and total assets of approximately \$700 million; and

WHEREAS, One of Tennessee's most wealthy men with a net worth of \$350 million, Jim Ayers is one of this State's most benevolent and selfless citizens; in the words of his longtime friend and prominent Nashville businessman Ted Welch: "Wealthy people can do two things with their money: be a slave to their money, or have the money be a slave to them to do greater good. That is what Jim Ayers decided to do. The world will be a better place because of Jim Ayers having lived"; and

WHEREAS, Decatur County, in particular, is an unquestionably better place to live because of the presence of Mr. Ayers and his beloved wife Sharon, who operates a clothing store in Parsons; with only 10,000 residents, Decatur County is one of Tennessee's poorest counties with a per capita income of \$20,000, but the situation could easily be much worse if not for Mr. Ayers' businesses and generosity; and

WHEREAS, Traditionally, higher education has not been an option for the majority of the residents of Decatur County, but the Ayers Foundation Scholars Program has quickly reversed

that situation, making it financially possible for every county graduate to attend college; the innovative program, funded through a \$12 million donation from Mr. Ayers, provides up to \$4,000 for four years to every Decatur County student who has been accepted into college; and

WHEREAS, Additionally, the Foundation pays the salary of two full-time counselors who work with students at the county's two high schools to assist students in selecting courses, navigating the college application process, and acquiring additional scholarships to cover the costs of education; those counselors also have been tracking the program's inaugural class, striving to ensure that the students stay on track; and

WHEREAS, In its first year, the innovative program has proven to be extremely successful and has produced astounding results; in the year before the program was instituted, only 30 of the county's graduates pursued higher education, but, following the program's institution, 81 of 125 seniors were accepted into higher education in 2000; and

WHEREAS, Although the cost of the program can be calculated, its value to the Decatur County community cannot fully be quantified in dollars and cents; its ultimate worth will only be realized over many years as it changes the family trees of the county's citizens; and

WHEREAS, In reflecting upon her daughter's newfound opportunity to seek further education, one student's mother said, "You think there's no way it could happen; there's not enough money; it's too expensive. If this had not come about, she would not have been able to do this"; and

WHEREAS, Jim Ayers knows firsthand the value of education; he was blessed to have been raised by two parents who expected him to succeed and provided much support and every opportunity to achieve that success; and

WHEREAS, Desiring nothing more than the success of his friends and neighbors, he has now provided similar advantages for all the residents of Decatur County and hopes that "each generation will raise expectations for their children, and the first thing you know, two or three generations down, a big percentage of these students who graduate will be told by their

parents, 'Look, you need an MBA if you want to do research; you're nothing without a Ph.D. in Biology.' Nobody talks that talk around here. It can happen; it will happen. The thing now is the execution of the plan; we've got the plan"; and

WHEREAS, A true visionary in the realm of public service and social progress who has unfailingly advanced the greater good, Jim Ayers has made more contributions to his local community that can easily be listed. An example of his charity is the million dollar donation that he made to the United Way to be utilized for economic growth in Decatur County; and

WHEREAS, That donation spawned the Community Action Network, a public-private partnership of individuals, businesses, churches, and government agencies that encourages economic development and industrial recruitment; among the organization's numerous divisions are an educational foundation, a river development program, a Main Street project, and a business council; and

WHEREAS, Jim Ayers is a philanthropist of the highest merit; having been richly blessed himself, he strives to share his blessings with those whom life has treated less kindly; and

WHEREAS, Mr. Ayer's indomitable spirit and drive are indeed extraordinary, and this State may never know his equal as a community leader; and

WHEREAS, His impeccable character and his laudable devotion to using his time, resources, and efforts to perpetuate the greater good in service of his fellow human beings are worthy of the unfettered admiration and respect of all Tennesseans; and

WHEREAS, He has been honored with the Silver Beaver Award, the highest recognition given by the Boy Scouts of America to a non-Scout and with an honorary doctorate by Union University; and it is altogether appropriate that these legislative bodies now join together in saluting this laudable Tennessean; now, therefore,

BE IT RESOLVED BY THE SENATE OF THE ONE HUNDRED SECOND GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE STATE OF TENNESSEE, THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES CONCURRING, That we honor and commend Mr. Jim Ayers for his invaluable contributions to

the quality of life in Decatur County and this State, reflecting fondly upon his stalwart commitment to ensuring that the youth of Decatur County have the opportunity to pursue their dreams through higher education.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, That we wish him much happiness and success in his future endeavors

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