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OFFICE OF THE MAYOR

CITY OF CHICAGO

LORI E. LIGHTFOOT
MAYOR

February 24, 2021

TO THE HONORABLE, THE CITY COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF CHICAGO

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I transmit herewith, together with Aldermen Sadlowski Garza, Ramirez Rosa, Dowell, King, Hairston, Harris, Thompson, Cardenas, Quinn, Burke, Coleman, Moore, O'Shea, Brookins, Rodriguez, Scott, Sigcho Lopez, Maldonado, Ervin, Taliaferro, Reboyras, Waguespack, Austin, Villegas, Mitts, Nugent, Reilly, Smith, Tunney, Martin, Osterman, Hadden, and Silverstein, a resolution honoring the life and memory of former Chicago Teacher' Union President Karen Lewis.

Your favorable consideration of this resolution will be appreciated.

RESOLUTION

WHEREAS, The Members of this Chamber were deeply saddened to learn of the death on February 8, 2021, at age 67, of Karen Lewis, the former president of the Chicago Teachers Union and a respected citizen of the City of Chicago; and

WHEREAS, Born on July 20, 1953, Ms. Lewis was raised in Chicago's Hyde Park neighborhood. Her parents, Geoffrey Jennings and Martha Gakins, were both Chicago Public School ("CPS") teachers. Ms. Lewis attended Kenwood High School, where her father taught wood shop, and Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts before transferring to

Dartmouth College in New Hampshire. The only Black woman admitted to its Class of 1974, Ms. Lewis graduated from Dartmouth College with a Bachelor's Degree in Sociology and Music; and

WHEREAS, After graduating from college, Ms. Lewis moved to Oklahoma and later to Barbados. In 1984, she returned to Chicago to attend medical school at the University of Illinois, initially hoping to become a doctor. While there, Ms. Lewis realized that she was most interested in chemistry. In 1987, Ms. Lewis began her 22-year teaching career with CPS as a substitute chemistry teacher at Sullivan High School, where, in her words, she fell "madly, passionately in love" with teaching. In 1990, Ms. Lewis began teaching full time at Lane Technical Preparatory High School, where she helped lead efforts to integrate students of color and from working class families into the student body. In 2006, she accepted a full-time teaching position at King College Preparatory High School; and

WHEREAS, Deeply committed to her students and fellow teachers, Ms. Lewis worked throughout her career to increase her teaching proficiency and knowledge about the unique challenges confronting public school students and educators. In 1993, Ms. Lewis received a Master's Degree in Education and Inner City Studies at Northeastern Illinois University, and, in 2002, she earned a Master's Degree in Fine Arts from Columbia College. A nationally certified CPS teacher, Ms. Lewis believed in teaching the whole child, once remarking that she "measured [her] success as a teacher by the hugs at the end of the year, by the conversations with kids who say, 'I never thought of it that way.'"; and

WHEREAS, A formidable leader in the fight for public education reform, Ms. Lewis joined the Chicago Teachers Union ("CTU") in 1988, where she advocated for increased school funding, transparency in administration, and social justice within the education system. A CTU delegate at Lane Technical High School, Ms. Lewis became increasingly involved in union activity when, in 2008, she was named co-chair of the newly formed Coalition of Rank-and-File Educators ("CORE"), a group of like-minded teachers who believed in funding public education, blocking the expansion of charter schools, resisting school closures and increases in class size, and fighting for the collective good of students, families and school communities; and

WHEREAS, In 2010, Ms. Lewis was elected president of the CTU. She led by example, reducing the salaries of union officers and transferring the savings into outreach programs for educators and staff, and spearheading The Schools Chicago Students Deserve, a 2012 report calling for increased funding for schools, smaller class sizes, more nurses and social workers, and a greater role for educators in developing school curriculum. She was elected in 2013 to a second term as CTU president, receiving 80% of the votes cast by its members, a position Ms. Lewis held until June of 2018, when she retired after undergoing brain surgery; and

WHEREAS, A truly remarkable woman, with a sharp wit and dazzling smile, Ms. Lewis was a connoisseur of the arts and culture. She spoke three languages, studied the Talmud, played the piano, loved the opera, show tunes and stand-up comedy, and enjoyed dancing; and

WHEREAS, Karen Lewis will always be remembered as a fierce advocate for public education, as a tenacious and tireless champion of Chicago's teachers and children; for her unerring pursuit of a just and equitable public school system, and for her deep-seated love of Chicago; and

WHEREAS, Karen Louis is survived by her husband, John W. Lewis; her sister, Keli Jennings; her stepchildren, Antionette, Randolph, and Adolph; her grandchildren, Kariah, Aaron, John, Jade, Jasmine, and Journey; her great grandchildren, Angel and Michaela; and by countless admirers and friends; now, therefore,

BE IT RESOLVED, That we, the Mayor and Members of the City Council of the City of Chicago, assembled this twenty-fourth day of February, 2021, do hereby honor the life and memory of Karen Louis; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, That suitable copies of this resolution be presented to the family of Karen Lewis as a sign of our sympathy and good wishes.