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Legislative Hearing on H.R. 10084, Renewing the African American Civil Rights Network Act

Subcommittee on Federal Lands

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Good afternoon, Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, and Members of this Subcommittee.

I am Dr. Bobby Donaldson, Professor of History and Founding Executive Director of the Center for Civil Rights History and Research at the University of South Carolina, Columbia campus. I also serve as Principal Historian for Columbia SC 63: Our Story Matters, a heritage tourism initiative that highlights our city's pivotal role in the Civil Rights Movement.

It is an honor to testify today in support of H.R. 10084, which extends the authorization of the National Park Service's African American Civil Rights Network (known as AACRN) for the next decade.

I want to express my appreciation to Congressman James E. Clyburn for his unwavering commitment to preserving our nation's history and for his advocacy of the African American Civil Rights Network.

The Network, established by Congress in 2017, brings together historic sites, museums, research centers, archival collections, and professional organizations, providing resources and support to preserve, document, and share the history of the Civil Rights Movement.

The Center for Civil Rights History and Research at the University of South Carolina was established in 2015 to investigate and promote our state's pivotal (and often overlooked) contributions to the struggle for civil and human rights in our nation.

Our Center and the University of South Carolina joined the Network in 2022. Through a series of cooperative agreements with the Network, our Center has expanded its capacity to advance scholarly research, educational training, preservation projects, and public engagement through exhibitions, workshops, conferences, lectures, documentary films, and guided tours.

In addition to partnerships and programs, the cooperative agreements with the Network facilitate our ability to train a new generation of public historians who will continue this important work. We actively support and organize civil rights tours for undergraduate students, providing immersive, on-site experiences that connect them directly to the history and legacy of the Civil Rights Movement.

Through these tours, internships, post-doctoral fellowships, research grants, and collaborative projects with Historically Black Colleges and Universities, we are equipping students, emerging scholars, and educators with the tools to preserve, interpret, and disseminate the Movement's history.

Network-funded programs like our *Eyewitnesses to the Movement* series, *Women in the Movement* initiative, *Justice for All* exhibit, and our recent *Where Do We Go From Here?* conference, enable us to connect civil rights veterans, such as Minnijean Brown-Trickey of the Little Rock Nine and Dorris D. Wright of the Greenville Eight, with other activists, educators, museum leaders, heritage tourism professionals, preservationists, and historians from across the country, ensuring that our collective efforts will keep this history alive.

In September 2022, I had the privilege of standing with Congressman Clyburn, National Park Service Director Charles Sams, and Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland on the campus of the Scott's Branch High School in Summerton, South Carolina. This site, now on the National Register of Historic Places, commemorates the extraordinary courage of ordinary citizens—farmers, maids, mechanics, returning World War II veterans, teachers, and preachers—whose determined fight for equal education led to the *Briggs v. Elliott* lawsuit. That case, one of five consolidated into the *Brown v. Board of Education* United States Supreme Court ruling in 1954, helped dismantle legal segregation in America's public schools. Sites in Summerton are now becoming a part of the Network and the *Brown v. Board of Education National Historical Park*.

This year, during the 70th-anniversary commemoration of *Brown v. Board* and *Briggs v. Elliott* in Columbia, the Center and the South Carolina Civil Rights Museum invited Mrs. Celestine Parson Lloyd, a student at Scott's Branch High School in the early 1950s. She returned to South Carolina from her current home in New York City and shared her family's painful sacrifices and struggles during and after the legal campaign. Her riveting oral history, now housed in our archives, underscores the Network's primary mission: identifying, preserving, amplifying, and connecting largely unknown or overlooked stories and experiences across our nation.

At a recent program organized by our Center, Dr. Cleveland Sellers, Jr., a South Carolina native and a member of the SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) Legacy Project told an audience, "Please don't let our stories die with us." His statement reminds us that the youngest members of the Movement are in their twilight years and underscores the urgent need to preserve this vital history.

As we reflect on the impact of the Network and its enormous potential in the future, I am reminded of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s Nobel Peace Prize address, delivered 60 years ago, on December 10, 1964, in Oslo.

Dr. King paid tribute to the "known pilots" and the "unknown ground crew," the individuals whose behind-the-scenes work propelled the Movement forward. He envisioned a future where their sacrifices would be properly recognized, documented, and publicized.

Dr. King concluded his remarks by stating:

> Most of these people will never make the headlines, and their names will not appear in *Who's Who.* Yet when years have rolled past and when the blazing light of truth is focused on this marvelous age in which we live, men and women will know and children will be taught that we have a finer land, a better people, a more noble civilization because these humble children of God were willing to suffer for righteousness' sake.

Fortunately, through H.R. 10084 and the renewal of the African American Civil Rights Network Act, we have an opportunity to make Dr. King's vision of a fuller and more comprehensive history a reality.

By empowering communities to uncover and share their stories, safeguarding historic properties, and fostering programmatic partnerships, the African American Civil Rights Network ensures that the history of this "marvelous age" not only remains accessible but continues to inform and inspire future generations in the pursuit of "liberty and justice for all."

Again, I extend my tremendous gratitude to Congressman Clyburn for his leadership on this legislation. Mr. Chairman, I thank you and the committee for the opportunity to share my thoughts this afternoon.

I welcome any questions you may have.