

February 24, 2023

Mr. Speaker, I rise during Black History month to honor the life of an extraordinary leader, educator and pillar of the St. Petersburg community, Mr. Mordecai Walker.

Mr. Walker was born in Citrus Park in rural Hillsborough County on July 4, 1924, to Charlie and Pearl Walker. He attended segregated schools in Hillsborough County – Citrus Park School for colored children, Booker T. Washington Junior High and Middleton High School, where he graduated in 1943. Mr. Walker started his college education at Bethune-Cookman University where he had the distinct honor of shaking the hand of First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt and Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune. However, as the war continued in Europe and the south Pacific, Mr. Walker was drafted into the U.S. Army, where he served overseas in New Guinea.

After attaining the rank of Sergeant and completing his enlistment in 1946, Mr. Walker returned to higher education at Tennessee State University (TSU) where he completed his bachelor’s degree in agriculture and then he went on to earn his master’s degree in agriculture from Florida A & M University. As a student at TSU, Mr. Walker was an essay winner for writing “America’s Most Popular Athlete” **–** writing that Joe Louis was more popular than Jackie Robinson. For winning the essay, he was given an all-expenses paid trip to New York City to see Joe Louis fight. During that trip Mr. Walker remembers going to an integrated New York City theater to see Gone with the Wind.

While at TSU, Mr. Walker competed on the track team with Olympian Mickey Patterson and Ed Temple, who later became an Olympic coach. In 1950, he was initiated into the Rho Psi Chapter of Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc. Mr. Walker would go on to become one of the original seven founders of the Eta Rho graduate chapter in St. Petersburg, Fla. in 1962, where he also served as the Chapter Basileus from 1991-1993. After more than 70 years of service, Mr. Walker remains active in the local chapter and is still committed to Omega’s four cardinal principals of Manhood, Scholarship, Perseverance and Uplift.

After graduating from TSU, Mr. Walker returned to Tampa to teach at Simmons Elementary School in Plant City and later Middleton High School in Tampa, where he was a driving force in establishing the agriculture program. Mr. Walker was pivotal in creating a curriculum and funding sources to bring the program to fruition. After his short stint in Hillsborough County, he relocated to Pinellas County, where he spent more than 30 years teaching, advancing and developing agricultural programs. Mr. Walker was inducted into TSU’s Agriculture Hall of Fame for his 30+ years of service to advancing the field of agriculture in education. In 2019, he was also inducted into the City of St. Petersburg Senior Hall of Fame for his services of volunteering to help the quality of life for residents of St. Petersburg.

Mr. Walker is known for overcoming adversity. Coming of age in an era of segregation, Mr. Walker acted with dignity and grace, showing respect to everyone around him even when he was not afforded that same respect. During the Civil Rights movement, he was active in the Ambassador’s Club, which was a civic club that worked to address the ongoing fight for civil rights, as well as celebrating the community’s achievements during this time.

Mr. Walker is the oldest living member of the Historic Gas Plant Community, which was the second African American neighborhood formed in St. Petersburg. This historic community thrived from business, entertainment, and education. It was the place for working class African Americans. Unfortunately, many families were eventually uprooted during the expansion of Interstate-275 during the 1970’s.

Mr. Speaker, today I join with the entire community of St. Petersburg in honoring Mr. Mordecai Walker for his long commitment to education, bettering the lives of all those around him and as a living legacy.

Sincerely,

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Kathy Castor

United States Representative

Florida – District 14