Senate General Government and Agency Review Committee

House Bill 325 – Proponent Written Testimony

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Chairman Schuring, Vice Chair Rulli, Ranking Member O'Brien and members of the Senate General Government and Agency Review Committee, thank you all for the opportunity to submit written proponent testimony in support of House Bill 325, which would enact section 5.293 of the Ohio Revised Code to designate February 18 as Toni Morrison Day in the state of Ohio.

I have been employed by the Lorain Public Library System as a librarian since July 1990. Toni Morrison – known to her family and her colleagues at our library as Chloe Wofford - has been among the Lorain citizens we are proudest of. Over the decades, as well-earned awards and honors (detailed in the extensive resume previously provided to the committee) flowed Toni's way, we became aware that our library system had the responsibility to preserve her local legacy for the Lorain community, and indeed the nation and the world.

Upon her winning the Nobel Prize for Literature in October 1993, many in the community wanted to rename streets, rename the library system, among other ideas. When the community discussion reached Toni's ears, she asked us to establish a reading room in her name that would – in her words – 'be the one place available in the neighborhood with a quiet room and comfortable chairs." Our library had been where she spent many hours reading books, so that is what she wanted from us. And we gave it to her. Toni attended the dedication of the Toni Morrison Reading Room in early 1995. In fall and winter 2000, our library renovated the reading room. It was re-dedicated in her honor and memory on February 18, 2020 on what would have been her 89th birthday.

In the decades since the opening of the Reading Room, many visitors and scholars visit our library in an effort to learn more about what Lorain meant to Toni, and what we meant to her and to her writing as well. Toni has always acknowledged the effect Lorain and Ohio had on her writing. "In my work, no matter where it's set," she once told an audience at Oberlin College, "the imaginative process always starts right here on the lip of Lake Erie."

In many interviews over the course of decades, Toni would point to the sense of community she experienced as a child in Lorain as key to the development of her writing. Her family had followed the Great Migration north to Ohio from Georgia and Alabama in order to give themselves and their children a better life and a better education. Her neighbors were white, were African-American, were Hungarian, Slovak, Italian. Many of those neighbors became her lifelong friends, friends she would visit with on her frequent private visits home and who she would share chicken paprikash dinners with. Her parents, like her neighbors and like so many other Ohioans of that that era were hard-working people who just wanted to pay the rent, keep their children in food and clothing and shoes, and also maybe to save a little bit to send those children to college or to see a movie now and then. The Woffords sang, told stories in family gatherings, and filled their houses with the books they could afford The books Chloe (now Toni) couldn't afford, she headed to the library for. Again, as so many children did and still do, to their benefit and to ours.

As a teacher, editor, and very much most of all, a writer, Toni changed the face of literature in ways which we will be measuring for decades to come. She wrote the book she couldn't find on library shelves - then wrote many others which were utterly original in subject, in style - and of course, in her beautiful words. Toni stepped up to the cultural table, took a seat, and welcomed many others to the table who were not previously granted seats simply because of the color of their skin. Her impact on Lorain is that of a woman from our poorest neighborhoods who showed us that words indeed do have the power to help us rise to live our very best lives.