FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Loss of a Legend
Noted TSU Professor Dr. Thomas F. Freeman dies at 100

HOUSTON (June 7, 2020) – Dr. Thomas F. Freeman, a legend, educational icon, and sage to innumerable students at Texas Southern University, passed away on Saturday, June 6, following a brief illness at age 100. Dr. Freeman celebrated his centennial birthday this past June at TSU.

The esteemed debate coach, Emeritus former faculty member, orator and minister at Mount Horem Baptist Church in Houston, Dr. Freeman has been a staple at Texas Southern University since his arrival in 1949. Under his leadership, TSU debaters have garnered multiple national and international titles during its existence.

“This is, most definitely, a sad day at Texas Southern University,” said TSU Interim President, Kenneth Huewitt. “Dr. Freeman exemplified all that is good about our university. His commitment, first and foremost, to his students, across eight decades of service, is what stands out in my mind as one of his greatest legacies. He offered all that he could in the pursuit of excellence. He expected the best from his students and colleagues, and he knew how to bring it out in everyone around him. Like the stars in the sky, the number of lives he influenced is beyond measure.”

Dr. Freeman instructed such iconic national and global figures as Representative Barbara Jordan and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and advised Academy Award winner Denzel Washington in the 2007 movie, The Great Debaters.

When Washington was preparing for his role as a debate coach he needed the help of a master in this specialty. After a search for what he called the “best debate coach in the world,” he selected Dr. Freeman to provide that help. With the insights and guidance of Dr. Freeman, Washington and his creative team produced an exhilarating movie masterpiece. The Great Debaters, which earned a Golden Globe “Best Picture” nomination, shone a bright spotlight on the accomplishments of debate teams at Historically Black Colleges and Universities.

In 2009, the TSU Board of Regents named the new Honors College after Dr. Freeman, helping to ensure that his legacy would forever inspire scholars at TSU to become leaders in the nation and the world.

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Prior to his arrival at TSU, Dr. Freeman received a Bachelor of Arts degree from Virginia Union University in Richmond, VA; a Bachelor of Divinity from Andover Newton Theological School in Newton Centre, MA; and a Doctor of Philosophy from the Divinity School of the University of Chicago, IL. He engaged in post-doctoral studies in 1963 at the University of Vienna in Austria, and pursued inter-institutional studies in 1973 at the Universities of Liberia, Lagos, and Ghana, and at Fourah Bay College in West Africa.

Dr. Freeman received numerous awards and accolades throughout his career, both before and after his “retirement” from TSU in 2013. Most recently, in 2018 he was the inaugural recipient of Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner’s History Makers Awards–Living Legend. The award pays tribute to outstanding individuals committed to making a difference in Houston through volunteerism, mentorship, advocacy and civic engagement.

The same year, the TSU Debate Team received a proclamation from Mayor Sylvester Turner and City Councilman Dwight Boykins in honor of its win at the inaugural HBCU National Speech and Debate Championship Tournament earlier that year. Mayor Turner declared June 19, 2018, as Texas Southern University Debate Team Day.

In 2017, Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee, then chair of the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation (CBCF), nominated Dr. Freeman for its highest honor. In Washington DC, the Congresswoman presented Dr. Freeman with The Phoenix Award and recognized his profound influence on our nation as a legendary educator and prolific scholar. His long-standing commitment to improving the quality of life for African American students was the basis of the award.

Dr. Freeman held numerous academic and administrative positions at TSU, in addition to his ongoing role as professor and debate coach. In 1966-1968, he was an assistant to the dean of the College of Arts and Sciences; 1968-1973, assistant dean of the College of Arts and Sciences; and 1973, dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. He directed TSU’s Weekend College, 1973-1980; the TSU Model Cities Training Center, 1970-1973; and the Potential Unlimited, HUD Youth Involvement Project, 1972-1974. He also served as head of the Philosophy Department from 1949-1959. Other non-TSU academic posts he held locally included a lecturer in the Religion Department at Rice University, 1972-1994; and an adjunct professor of speech at Houston Community College, 1980-1997.

Dr. Freeman’s talents as a spiritual guide are respected in the higher education community and the community at large. For almost 70 years, he served as minister of Mt. Horem Baptist Church in Houston, where he provided spiritual guidance since 1951. He served as a professor at Virginia Union University, where he taught Practical Theology; a Stahley Christian Scholar Lecturer at St. Paul’s College in Lawrenceville, VA; minister of Pleasant St. Baptist Church, Westerly, RI; and associate minister of Monumental Baptist Church, Chicago, IL. In 2001, a Houston Mayor’s Proclamation gave recognition to Mt. Horem’s Silver Anniversary and to Freeman’s outstanding civic leadership.

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Dr. Freeman was recognized internationally for his oratorical skills. He was the keynote speaker for many educational, social, religious, and civic occasions throughout the Houston area and beyond.

Dr. Freeman was born in Richmond, VA. His long-time wife Clarice Estell, who will turn 100 later this year. Together, they raised three children – Thomas Franklin Jr., Carter Evan, and Dr. Carlotta Vanessa. They have several grandchildren and two great grandchildren.

“My father’s life ended peacefully,” said Dr. Carlotta Freeman, daughter of Dr. Thomas F. Freeman. “Our family prefers to focus on the life he lived. We will announce the arrangements shortly."

Dr. Freeman received many awards during his career, including the Doctor of Humane Letters from Eastern Massachusetts University (1980 and 2000); American Performance Theatre Award (1992); Houston Urban League, Margaret Ross Barnett leadership Award (1992); TSU’s International Recognition Award (1992); Martin Luther King Drum Major Award (1995); Educator of the Year Award presented by the Black Caucus of the Texas Legislature (1995); Houston Trail Blaze for the Negro Heritage Foundation (2000); Trail Blaze Award from Houston Community College System (2003); and Doctor of Divinity from Bishop King Theological Seminary (2002); and National Speech & Debate Association Lifetime Achievement Award (2019). Freeman published the Choice of the Pew and is cited in both educational and civic publications.

Service information for Dr. Freeman is pending.

As Dr. Freeman was founder of the world-renowned TSU Debate Team, a memorial fund has been established in his honor. Donations to the Dr. Thomas F. Freeman Memorial Fund will be for the purposes of advancing the TSU Debate Team program. For more information, visit https://giving.tsu.edu/freemanfund/.

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ABOUT TEXAS SOUTHERN UNIVERSITY

Texas Southern University (TSU) honors our designation as a special-purpose institution for urban programming and research. TSU is a comprehensive university providing higher education access to the nation's underserved communities. TSU’s academic and research programs address critical urban issues, and prepares its diverse student population to become a force for positive change in a global society. TSU offers more than 100 undergraduate and graduate programs and concentrations – bachelor’s, master’s, doctoral and professional degrees – organized into 10 colleges and schools on a 150-acre campus nestled in the heart of Houston's historic Third Ward. The University’s enrollment has a population of more than 9,000 undergraduate and graduate-school academic candidates. Texas Southern has been a distinguished educational pioneer since 1927, and the University has become one of the most diverse and respected institutions in Texas. TSU has positioned itself as a proactive leader in educating underserved students and many who are the first in their family to attend college.