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For immediate release.

FEARLESS:

New Book Tells Story of Courageous Seamstress
Who Defeated the Poll Tax at the Supreme Court

The first book-length biography of Evelyn Thomas Butts (1924-1993), a poor seamstress from Norfolk, Virginia, who became a forceful and courageous voting rights champion and won a landmark U.S. Supreme Court case that abolished the poll tax.

FEARLESS: How a poor Virginia seamstress took on Jim Crow, beat the poll tax and changed her city forever was written by Butts' youngest daughter, Charlene Butts Ligon, a retired Air Force master sergeant. The book includes a foreword by Kenneth Cooper Alexander, the first African American to be elected mayor of Norfolk.

Butts, who lived most of her life in Norfolk, was a seamstress and the wife of a disabled World War II Army veteran. She grew into her roles as a relentless community and political activist while participating in a series of struggles over racial injustices.

Ligon began writing the book as a family-legacy project but soon realized that the story about her mother's battles, victories and defeats needed to be learned by anyone interested in voting rights, civil rights and grassroots organizing, as well be studied by young people looking to improve their communities. "It is important to tell my mother's story to help inspire others and instruct them about the courage and determination it takes to affect change," Ligon said.

Poll taxes – part of a package of laws throughout the post-Reconstruction South in the late 1800s and early 1900s – were aimed primarily at denying the voting rights of African Americans during the resurgence of white supremacy politics. The 24th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1964 outlawed poll taxes as a prerequisite for voting in federal elections but did not say anything about these taxes for state and local elections. Meanwhile, a lawsuit filed in 1963 by Butts and her attorney, Joseph A. Jordan Jr., had been making its way through the courts and was combined with a lawsuit by several northern Virginia residents.

Then, on March 24, 1966, the Supreme Court ruled 6-3 that poll taxes were an unconstitutional violation of the equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment and that "Voter qualifications have no relation to wealth nor to paying or not paying this or any other tax."

Butts did not stop there. She stepped up her efforts to help thousands of African Americans register to vote for the first time and spearheaded a variety of voter-education initiatives. Throughout her many years as a community volunteer, Butts also fought to improve housing and neighborhood

conditions for low-income people, protested employment discrimination and campaigned for integrated public schools.

"When she saw an injustice, she organized to make change. She was a powerful force to be reckoned with, loved by many, feared by others. She knew the meaning of persistence and subsequently was a powerful influence," Ligon said. "I'm hoping that this book will appeal to young readers especially. People need to participate, and I think this book can help guide them."

While Norfolk, Virginia, and its environs are the backdrop for the story of Evelyn Butts' life and activism, there are lessons that can apply to many communities and readers of all ages. "There are always new obstacles, even in voting rights," Ligon said. "The poll tax was an important part of American history that should not be forgotten because we have to stay vigilant about continued attempts at voter suppression, which keeps coming back in new forms. That's why we need to continue to learn and keep the message going from generation to generation."

Ligon, who has an ancestor who fought for the Union during the Civil War, retired as an Air Force meteorologist in 1995 and lives in Bellevue, Nebraska, where she is active in politics. "Once I started getting active on my own, I began to develop a deeper appreciation about what my mother had encountered and what she had to do for voter registration and voter turnout," Ligon said.

"*FEARLESS* is a story of courage, courage to speak your mind and to act," Ligon said. "We really need more people to speak up and get out there working to hold the ground we've gained and to move us forward. That struggle is always going to be there for each generation."

The book has been endorsed by Chuck Robb, a former Virginia governor and former U.S. senator, who stayed at Butts' home during his first campaign. Robb described *FEARLESS* as "the inside story of the struggle for basic human rights, told from the perspective of those who lived through the oppression and fought for change."

Norfolk Mayor Kenneth Cooper Alexander, in his foreword for the book, said of Evelyn Butts, "What she accomplished as a voting rights champion truly spans the generations and deserves our continued recognition."

FEARLESS can be ordered on the website, <http://evelyntbutts.com/>. It is also available on amazon.com in hardcover and kindle format.