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Remembering Sen. George Goodwin: He Sued Melvin Evans and Won Right For Immigrant Children to Attend Public Schools

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An elevated view of the Earl B. Ottley Legislative Building in 2015. By. ERNICE GILBERT, V.I. CONSORTIUM

Former businessman, cricket enthusiast, and legislator George Goodwin was emblematic of the contribution immigrants from other Caribbean islands have made in building the history of the U.S. Virgin Islands. Following his death earlier this week, current and former lawmakers have hailed Goodwin as a community stalwart and beloved leader.

Born in Antigua in 1941, Mr. Goodwin moved to the Virgin Islands in the wave of immigration from elsewhere in the Caribbean, earning his associate's degree in Hotel Management from the

College of the Virgin Islands in 1968. He then continued his education in management, adding qualifications in accounting and insurance from Monmouth and George Washington universities.

Returning to the Virgin Islands, Goodwin first worked for the government as an accountant in the Departments of Finance and Labor before becoming the director of CETA - the Comprehensive Employment and Training Administration and Business Administration. Eventually, he moved into the political realm by becoming special assistant to then Congressional Delegate Ron DeLugo. He also operated his own accounting service, established in 1971.

Mr. Goodwin was elected into the 20th and 23rd Legislatures, and his time as a lawmaker “was informed by his childhood in Antigua, his experiences as a business owner, and his extensive background in management and accounting,” according to President of the 35th Legislature Senator Novelle Francis Jr. “His legacy in this territory will remain as one who stood for equality for the underserved, and whose efforts were the catalyst for the landmark decision that all children residing in the territory...were entitled to a public education.”

Mr. Francis was referring to Mr. Goodwin’s work, alongside other activists, to sue then-Governor Melvin Evans over a territorial policy that barred children of unauthorized immigrants from enrolling in public school in the Virgin Islands. The lawsuit eventually led to a court order that allowed thousands of children of migrant workers in the territory to attend public school.

Mr. Goodwin’s interest in migrants to the territory extended to providing assistance in completing paperwork in order to migrate legally, said Senator Donna Frett-Gregory in a statement expressing condolences on the former senator’s passing. His pan-Caribbean leanings led him to re-introduce the sport of cricket to the Virgin Islands.

Mr. Goodwin, according to Senator Carla Joseph, was also among the first pioneers of sports tourism in the territory, using his love for cricket as the vehicle for doing so. Earlier this year, Ms. Joseph sponsored legislation that honored Goodwin with a Virgin Islands Medal of Honor, and the renaming of the cricket field in Estate Nazareth after the former community leader. That legislation was passed by the Senate and signed into law by governor Albert Bryan Jr.

Unfortunately, Mr. Goodwin passed away before the ceremony to confer this honor could be held. He would have turned 82 years old on September 15, 2023.