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Festival Village Opens as MokoVille, Honoring Virgin Islands' Cultural Stalwarts

Willard John acknowledged for 43 years of dedication to the moko jumbie craft, teaching hundreds in the USVI

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Nelcia Charlemagne **December 30, 2023**

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Local leaders, honorees and pageant royalty cut ribbon to mark the opening of the 71st Crucian Christmas Festival Village opening. By. SHOT BY SIN/V.I. CONSORTIUM/DIVISION OF FESTIVALS

On Friday, during the official opening of the 71st Crucian Christmas Festival, the remarkable contributions of two distinguished Virgin Islanders were honored. Festival Village was aptly named MokoVille in tribute to Willard John, a key figure dedicated to preserving the moko jumbie tradition. Alongside him, Bradley Christian, the chair of the Crucian Christmas Festival's Cultural Night Committee, received special recognition from the Government of the Virgin

Islands for his contributions to the territory's culture and traditions.

Mr. John, who was celebrated for his “invaluable contributions to preserving the cultural and traditional heritage” of the USVI, explained that he had been involved in that particular craft for 43 years. His group, the Guardians of Culture Moko Jumbies was established in 1993, and since then Mr. John and his team have taught some 350 young Virgin Islanders the art of the moko jumbie. “That’s my way of assuring that it stays alive,” he told the audience.

“It is my intention to continue to promote, to preserve, and to educate about this form and I will continue to do that,” Mr. John declared. He appealed for the administration's support to ensure that the moko jumbie aspect of Virgin Islands culture continues to thrive, calling for the institutionalization of the art form.

“The reason it is alive today is because it stands on the shoulders of individuals, but we need a lot more support. I ask our leaders to give us that support,” was his plea. He said that the additional support is necessary to ensure “our culture is organic, and we don't set it up just to please tourists.”

Meanwhile, Bradley Christian was honored for his “unwavering commitment, artistic creativity, and playing a pivotal role in ensuring our cultural legacy continues to thrive and resonate with current and future generations.” Mr. Christian thanked the Department of Tourism for “this wonderful honor bestowed upon me this evening.” Mr. Christian also sounded a clarion call for aid from the Department of Education to ensure that “our youngsters can get into it at a young age and learn to do it the correct way,” referring to quadrille and the art of the moko jumbie.

Present for the opening of MokoVille, the territory’s congressional delegate Stacey Plaskett congratulated the duo for “all that you do to continue to bring culture and awareness to the people of the Virgin Islands and of course around the world.” Senate President Novelle Francis also congratulated them, noting that the V.I. Legislature has also recognized the pair for their contributions.

Lieutenant Governor Tregenza Roach also joined in sharing commendations for Messrs John and Christian, who he said “live their lives contributing to this culture in so many aspects. They are the people who helped to make this place so very special.”

Governor Albert Bryan, for his part, declared that he was less interested in the foreign acts and entertainment performing at MokoVille, instead wishing to focus on “the things that define us.” Their legacy, he said, is apparent, as the audience was filled with individuals that they have trained and can “carry on the culture.”

Notwithstanding, Mr. Byran admitted that a host of simultaneous needs in the territory often means that “things like our culture and stuff get lost.” He called on cultural activists to “constantly tug at the coattails of leadership” to remind them of the importance of traditional cultural events. “It's not that we are not paying attention to it. It’s just so many things that have to be done for this community. So I urge you to reach out again and I personally want to make sure that we put in the resources to preserve our beautiful culture,” said the governor.

The ceremony to declare MokoVille officially open ended with a ribbon cutting by Governor Albert Bryan.