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# TenaVel Thomas Becomes First Virgin Islander to Win Prestigious Arthur S. Fleming Award

**Thomas defies gender norms to secure a high-level managerial position at U.S. Customs and Border Protection**

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## TenaVel Thomas

TenaVel Thomas, who holds a [high-level managerial position](#) in the U.S Customs and Border Protections Agency's Port of New York/Newark, is the first Virgin Islander to receive the Arthur S. Fleming Award nearly eight decades after its establishment.

Every year, twelve federal employees are selected for the prestigious award that celebrates outstanding work in fields including applied science and engineering, leadership and management, clinical trials, and translational research. Ms. Thomas was nominated by CBP, her agency, for her

leadership and management prowess.

Less than a year ago, Ms. Thomas was appointed to lead the U.S. Customs and Border Protection Agency's oversight of the Port of New York/Newark. That CBP station is noted as including the busiest seaport on the eastern seaboard, as well as the fourth busiest airport in the United States. Having joined CBP in 2008, she quickly rose through the ranks, securing her managerial position while simultaneously defying gender norms as a female leader in a male-dominated industry.

When Ms. Thomas spoke to the Consortium shortly after her appointment to the role in June 2023, she outlined plans to promote activities that would be impactful both within the CBP and support women in the industry. These initiatives supported a host of other programs spearheaded by Ms. Thomas, including a new repatriation center to serve refugees that arrived in the United States through the JFK airport and a full-time resiliency team that focuses on workforce care.

It is this work and more that has earned her a place on the prestigious list of Arthur S. Fleming awardees. The [award's website](#) states that Ms. Thomas's "exemplary and innovative leadership has led to the successful facilitation of over \$250 billion of import goods and 6.5 million passengers per year, and her impact has resonated nationally across the entire CBP enterprise." She is described as possessing a "steadfast passion for national security and social equity."

For Ms. Thomas, who developed a love for her industry on the island of St. Thomas, her nomination was a pleasant surprise. "Just to think about the other individuals who got nominated alongside me is just amazing," she told the Consortium. The final list includes scholars, scientists, neurologists, with the USVI's very own TanaVel Thomas standing among the best employees the federal government lists among its ranks..

"To say that I'm honored by this selection is an understatement," Ms. Thomas said. She told Consortium journalists that she continues to "give her best self" daily. "I'm just an island girl - at least in my mind - doing my best and being the best public servant. It truly is incredible," she reflected. Ms. Thomas has long credited her close-knit family for helping to fuel her success, and told us that her father is thrilled that his daughter is now "walking on the moon."

The board for this award includes the George Washington University, members of the private sector, and the President of the United States of America.

The Arthur S. Fleming Award will be bestowed on TanaVel Thomas in November.