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# Senate Committee Approves Bill to Honor Cultural Icon Willard John

**Community members, including Aminah Saleem and Samuel Sanes, testify to Mr. John’s impact on local youth and cultural preservation**

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**USVI Cultural Icon, Willard John. By. V.I. LEGISLATURE**

On Friday, lawmakers on the Senate Committee on Government Operations Veterans Affairs and Consumer Protection voted in favor of honoring Willard John “for his many contributions to the youth and the culture of the Virgin Islands.”

?Sponsored by Senator Marise James, Bill 35-0195 seeks to officially cement Mr. John’s legacy in the territory. However, as Senator James noted, “our children aren’t going to look at the bills and resolutions – right now they need to see it in books.” She made the comments after having

attended a recent book launch by a Virgin Islands author, and advocated for more such projects telling the life stories of the territory's heroes.?

Aminah Saleem, one of the afternoon's testifiers, called Mr. John not just a friend but "an honorary family member for over the last 30 years." She described her late son as being one of the catalysts for Mr. John's work bringing the culture of the moko jumbie to the children of the territory. Ms. Saleem described how her son and his friend "spent an entire summer walking all around Estate Strawberry on stilts they made out of the old closet door. They wanted to be moko jumbies so badly that they thought that they could teach themselves." That spurred the adults around them to contact Mr. John who "responded immediately and said 'yes, I'd love to start a group.' That's how the Ricardo Richards Moko Jumbies were formed." Ms. Saleem recounted. The group eventually evolved into the Guardians of Culture Moko Jumbies, and Mr. John has been at the helm for over 30 years, inducting over 500 Virgin Islands youth into the artform. Mr. John is now engaged in mentoring a new instructor so that the moko jumbie culture can grow and thrive for an additional 30 years and more, said Ms. Saleem.?

St. Croix Administrator Samuel Sanes was also on hand to sing the praises of Mr. John. He congratulated Senator Marise James for the measure, which he said was not just a legal document, but also a thorough and detailed testimony to Mr. John's life and accomplishments.

"I think the only thing missing was his blood type," Mr. Sanes joked. He recounted the first time meeting Mr. John, who was the principal of the Elena Christian Jr. High school at the time. Mr. Sanes worked for a facility that housed children with behavioral issues, and he was at the school that day to advocate for one of the children who was about to be suspended. "I went to the school that day to defend my client," Mr. Sanes said, recalling that "at the end of the conversation with Mr. John, I wanted to add more days to the suspension." Mr. John's cool, collected demeanor quickly defused Mr. Sanes's hot temper, while he "respectfully addressed the student and calmly stated the reason for the suspension," Mr. Sanes recounted, using the anecdote to highlight Mr. John's signature unruffled approach to any situation.?

Mr. Sanes noted that "the history of the Virgin Islands has demonstrated the immense impact that certain individuals have on our society. Through the actions and leadership, they have significantly influenced the course of our future." Mr. John, the St. Croix administrator argued, is one of those individuals. "He is a man of integrity, he's an educator. He is a mentor," said Mr. Sanes.

Whitman Browne detailed for committee members Mr. John's long history of community service, including his association with the Rotary Club "from as far back as 1988." According to Mr. Browne, the "committed Virgin Islander has been giving back to his islands much more than the intricacies from his cultural creations." As teacher, principal, board chairman of the V.I. Port Authority, as well as of the St. Croix Agricultural Food Fair, [where he was recently honored](#), Mr. John — who was also honored [during the 2023-2024 Crucian Christmas Festival](#) — has contributed immensely to the development of St. Croix and the territory as a whole, Mr. Browne argued. "I knew Mr. John was earnestly engaged in the community before and since he retired from education. However, until I did the specific research, I had no knowledge of the extent to which he has been giving back to these islands," Mr. Browne said, ascribing that fact to Mr. John's humility and dislike for self-promotion.

During the discussion that followed the prepared testimony, Mr. John provided some insight as to his approach with teaching moko jumbie technique to the members of his group. "My endeavor is not to go as tall as possible, so I don't do the measurement thing. I think, first of all, the taller you

go, the less control you have on the stills. And really, you need to find that sweet spot where you can really perform and still look tall. So that's what my endeavor has always been," he explained. He said that he has fused his education background with the world of entertainment to produce "edutainment" for the community. "When we do our presentations, I speak about the history and the culture and how the moko jumbie developed into what it is today."

Noting that all moko jumbies currently practicing the craft in the Virgin Islands were either taught by Mr. John or by someone who was instructed by him, Senator Ray Fonseca described the honoree as "the direct line to all the moko jumbies." Ultimately, the measure honoring Mr. John was easily passed by all committee members present. The bill will now move to the Committee on Rules & Judiciary for vetting.

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