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Virgin Islanders Mark 176th Emancipation Day with Celebrations and Critique

Poetry readings, quelbe performances, and the annual "Fort to Fort Walk to Freedom" marked the 176th Emancipation Day on St. Croix, celebrating the island's history while addressing ongoing issues

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Tsehai Alfred **July 04, 2024**

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General Buddhoe statue in Frederiksted; attendees watching Stanley and the Ten Sleepless Knights perform at the Folklife Music Festival, Verne I Richards Park. By. TSEHAI ALFRED, V.I. CONSORTIUM

From poetry readings, quelbe performances, conch shell blowing, and the annual "Fort to Fort Walk to Freedom", the St. Croix community gathered at various events on Wednesday to celebrate the territory's 176th Emancipation Day anniversary— honoring the day's history while reflecting on the current conditions of Virgin Islanders.?

“I want to say happy emancipation to everyone, but the question is: are we emancipated?” asked Karen Dickenson, a local community activist, of the residents gathered at the United Caribbean Association (UCA) “Lionnes/Wombmen Rise” Emancipation event. UCA’s activity, held annually at Buddhoe Park in Frederiksted, also featured storytelling, youth presentations, and community dances, with many of the performers echoing Ms. Dickenson’s sentiment. As one poetry performer suggested to the crowd, “176 years and still we can’t see change.”?

Many community members said that their frustration with what they believe to be a lack of progress in the mobilization of Virgin Islanders over the past 176 years stems from recent alleged cases of government corruption as well as long-standing issues in the territory, such as poor access to health care and education, and the poor quality of both services. “For all that our ancestors done, all the blood that they have shed, today they look down on us and they’re embarrassed cause we stand down as a people and our government continue to do us what they want because we are not emancipated,” Ms. Dickenson declared.

For Ms. Dickenson, the government’s roughly [\\$1 million in funding](#) for 175th anniversary celebrations last year compared to paltry government support for this year’s anniversary represents the disingenuous nature of the government. “Last year was such a disservice to the whole celebration. We could have come together and made it bigger. Why we didn’t get some funding for this today?” Ms. Dickenson said in an interview with the Consortium following her speech. According to Dickenson, emancipation used to be a “true, big celebration” with student and youth involvement. This year, she said that the turnout, specifically youth participation, was disappointingly low.?

The nearby Stanley and the Ten Sleepless Knights Folklife Music Festival – held at the Verne I Richards Park – also featured a largely older audience. However, Kendell Henry, a member of the band, said that the festival has been successful at preserving the cultural music through all ages, young and old.

The band brought both British Virgin Islands and U.S. Virgin Islands musical cultures together at the event in what Mr. Henry described as a “quelbe, fungi fusion.” According to Mr. Henry, “quelbe music played a very significant part in emancipation [be]cause most of our songs are revolt songs: Queen Mary, Clear de Road, are all emancipation and fire burn songs.” Many of the “revolt songs” were played by the band at the festival. “Next year, Ten Sleepless Knights will be celebrating fifty-five years of quelbe music in the Virgin Islands, so next year be on the lookout for many other events,” Mr. Henry added.?

The “Fort to Fort Walk to Freedom” is another annual cultural event held on St. Croix. On Wednesday morning starting at around 4 a.m., dozens of residents marched from Fort Christian, reaching Fort Frederik at approximately 10 a.m. The march honors the same trek thousands of enslaved Africans took 176 years ago in demand of their freedom. In a change from previous years, former senator Terrence Positive Nelson said police officers who accompanied the group called on him not to not play his customary celebratory music on the walk.?

In a closing message to the people of the Virgin Islands, Ms. Dickenson advised community members to borrow the principles of ancestors 176 years ago in reclaiming the territory. “People stand up, we’re losing the Virgin Islands,” she declared.