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Superior Court Renaming to Honor Judge Verne Hodge's Legacy in Building USVI's Judiciary and Founding Rising Stars Orchestra

Judge Hodge, who transformed the Virgin Islands' court system and created the Rising Stars Steel Orchestra, will have the Superior Court of St. Thomas renamed in his honor

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Judge Verne A. Hodge By. V.I. LEGISLATURE

“I can think of no more appropriate way to take Judge Hodge into the future by having generations of people being able to look at that building and see that name, and be able to have this record of this remarkable legacy.” That was the assessment of Lieutenant Governor Tregenza Roach, who testified in support of Bill 35-0286, which seeks to honor Verne Antonio Hodge for his years of

dedicated service to the people of the Virgin Islands.

The bill, sponsored by Senator Kenneth Gittens, recommended renaming the building housing the Superior Court of the Virgin Islands, St. Thomas/St. John, the “Judge Verne A. Hodge Superior Court of the Virgin Islands”. It is an honor that Judge Hodge has declined in the past but has now reportedly been convinced to accept.

On Tuesday, Judge Hodge and members of the Committee on Government Operations, Veterans Affairs and Consumer Protection listened as a host of testifiers sang his praises. His work, said Mr. Gittens, “has left an indelible mark on our community.”?

A former attorney general of the USVI, Judge Hodge was appointed to that role by former governor Cyril E. King only four years after earning his law degree. According to Chief Justice Rhys Hodge, that appointment was a testament to his “intellect, work ethic, and overall excellence as an attorney and leader of the people.” Arguably, his most important role was as Presiding Judge of the Superior Court of the U.S Virgin Islands. There Judge Hodge “oversaw the greatest transformation of the Virgin Islands legal system, the creation of the modern Superior Court,” explained the Chief Justice.

Chief Justice Hodge credited Judge Verne Hodge with “[building] the modern-day Virgin Islands Superior Court, both literally and figuratively.” He was indeed responsible for overseeing the planning, financing, and construction of the RH Amphitheatre Complex on St. Croix and the Alexander Farrelly Justice Center on St. Thomas.?

Presiding Judge Debra Watlington mused that Judge Hodge “acquired the capital funds to construct the very courthouse which this bill intends to name in his honor.” Completed in 1993, Ms. Watlington contended that it was “perhaps the most modern government facility in St. Thomas.” “It is significant that Judge Hodge insisted that local plumbers, electricians and other local craftsmen worked on this project and others to get a piece of the pie,” emphasized Ms. Watlington. The honoree later told lawmakers that employing local workers allowed for expedient maintenance when necessary.?

For nearly four hours, the committee listened as subsequent testifiers complimented Judge Hodge’s character and the results of his hard work. Maria Cabret, Associate Justice in the Supreme Court of the Virgin Islands described him as one of the territory’s “brightest stars.” “I hope that when Presiding Judge Hodge’s name is placed on the St. Thomas Superior Court building, those who see it will be motivated to study his life and to be inspired,” she declared.?

Retired Judge Brenda Hollar, emotional during her testimony, called Judge Hodge a “humanitarian, visionary leader, and friend.” She, too, explained to lawmakers that his “aversion to public recognition” delayed the bestowment of the recognition on the now 90-year-old man. Throughout his career, Ms. Hollar says Judge Hodge was “totally selfless, preoccupied and absorbed with helping the disenfranchised, the disadvantaged, the forgotten, those who were in need of a second chance in life.”

His propensity to offer a second chance perhaps guided Judge Hodge’s creation of the Rising Stars Steel Orchestra, a program aimed at “steering at-risk youth away from the streets.” The chief justice explained that Judge Hodge had noted the “increasing number of criminal offenses committed by young children who had dropped out of school” and established the orchestra as a “crime prevention and diversion program.” According to Senator Gittens, “the innovative initiative has transformed countless lives, helping our young people build brighter futures.”

Asked to comment on his proudest accomplishment, Judge Hodge told Senator Samuel Carrion, “I’m very proud of having had the opportunity to help build the court up so that the court could become an independent court, as it is in the various states.” He urged the Legislature to keep the Academic and Cultural Awards endowment program going. “The endowment provides special funds for law, medicine and engineering,” Judge Hodge explained, arguing that it is largely responsible for the establishment of a professional class among the local population. “It gives you a good opportunity to help your children get this advanced degree so that when it comes to law, medicine, engineering and other advanced courses, we can help develop our population,” Judge Hodge declared.

“I believe that today's resolution is one of the most impactful resolutions that we have seen here in this Legislature,” declared Senator Novelle Francis. His fellow legislators, with not a negative comment between them, spent much time listening to Judge Hodge’s perspective on current events.?

“We are thankful that you finally agreed - at almost 91 years old - to accept and appear in person to receive this esteemed accolade,” said Judge Hodge’s daughter, Bridget.

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