

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson Inspires Virgin Islanders with Lessons on Perseverance and Purpose

During a discussion on St. Croix, the Supreme Court Justice encouraged young people to find their passion and shared personal stories of her journey from childhood inspiration to the nation's highest court.

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Supreme Court Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson at the Sydney Lee Entertainment Center, St. Croix, on Feb. 6, 2025, with District Court Judge Wilma Lewis (left). By. V.I. CONSORTIUM

Supreme Court Associate Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson — the first Black woman to serve on the nation's highest court — spoke to Virgin Islanders on Thursday night, offering insights on perseverance, passion, and purpose.

"What am I willing to work for?" Justice Jackson urged young people to ask themselves. "What do I like enough that I will put in the effort?" She explained that finding the answer to these questions often lays the foundation for a successful and fulfilling life and career.

Justice Jackson shared this advice during a discussion on St. Croix at the Sydney Lee Entertainment Center, hosted by the District Court of the Virgin Islands, part of her official visit to the territory. She was responding to a question from a 12-year-old girl in the audience, who asked for guidance on how to stay focused on her goals.

A Childhood Inspired by Law

Reflecting on her own early influences, Justice Jackson recalled that her passion for law began in childhood, inspired by watching her father attend law school. "My earliest memories were of my father sitting at the table with his law books, while I sat across from him with my coloring books," she said. "I always thought law was just what people did. I never really thought of doing anything else."

Raised in a household that valued education, excellence, and self-confidence, Jackson had Supreme Court aspirations from a young age. When applying to college, she wrote in her admissions essay that she wanted to attend Harvard because it would help her achieve her dream of being the first Black woman Supreme Court Justice to appear on a Broadway stage—a nod to her diverse interests and ambitions.

From Defender to Judge: A Career Rooted in Justice

Before her historic appointment to the Supreme Court, Justice Jackson built a distinguished legal career. She served as a public defender, was appointed to the U.S. Sentencing Commission under the Obama administration, and later became a District Court Judge in Washington, D.C..

She credits these roles with giving her a solid foundation in the application of law, especially her time as a trial court judge. "It's really, really helpful to have been a district court judge to know what it's like to handle cases from the ground up when you're now at a higher level and reviewing those proceedings," she explained. "At the trial level, the actual people appear before you, and you have to do the work of engaging with them, communicating with them."

Despite her many achievements, Justice Jackson remains grateful for the opportunities that led her to the nation's highest court. She acknowledges that her rise was made possible by key historical events, such as the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act, which dismantled racial barriers that had limited opportunities for previous generations.

"I am the first generation inheritor of Dr. Martin Luther King's dream," she said. "If Dr. Martin Luther King gave America a metaphorical check... my generation... reaped the first installment." She credited her parents—both first-generation college graduates—with ensuring she had access to the opportunities they were denied.

A Daughter's Unwavering Belief in Her Mother's Potential

Justice Jackson also revealed that, long before President Joe Biden nominated her, her then-13-year-old daughter believed she belonged on the Supreme Court.

Following the death of Justice Antonin Scalia in 2016, Jackson's daughter urged her to apply for the vacant position. When Jackson explained that Supreme Court justices are appointed, not self-nominated, her daughter took matters into her own hands, writing a letter to then-President Barack Obama, urging him to choose her mother.

That letter didn't land Jackson on the bench immediately, but her brilliant legal career eventually led to history being made.

The Moment That Changed Everything

Jackson recounted the exact moment she learned of her nomination.

"I was under my desk, on the phone, falling to the ground," she said, describing the shock of receiving the call from President Joe Biden, informing her that she was his pick to replace Justice Stephen Breyer.

After enduring a grueling vetting process, Jackson had convinced herself that the president had chosen someone else. When the call came, she had been wrapping up work and preparing for what she believed would be a disappointing dinner with friends. Instead, the evening turned into a historic celebration as she began drafting the speech she would deliver the next day, accepting the nomination.

Serving on the Supreme Court and Embracing Her Role as a Trailblazer

Now seated on the highest court in the land, Justice Jackson acknowledges her responsibility as a groundbreaking figure. She believes that the diversity of backgrounds among justices strengthens the Court's decision-making process.

"I think that what we do as judges is draw upon our experiences, all of the judges, whatever their experiences are," she said. "Because I've had a unique or different set of background experiences, I can speak to things. I can understand things."