

The Virgin Islands Consortium

‘More Than Just a Pool’: Vincent Mason Facility Reopens as Community Gathers to Celebrate

Frederiksted’s Vincent Mason Pool officially reopened Friday, drawing a large crowd and honoring the legacy of a space that has served generations on St. Croix, with James Benton—whose team restored the site—recalling childhood summers spent there,

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Officials, including Gov. Albert Bryan (center), Sen. Gittens, and James Benton with his daughter (right of the governor), along with other leaders at the Vincent Mason Pool reopening. By. GOV'T HOUSE

"Today is a huge one," said Vincent Roberts, as he surveyed the audience assembled at the Vincent Mason Pool on Friday. The nominee for commissioner of the Department of Sports, Parks and Recreation called it an honor to be able to officially open the facility, noting the extensive amount of work that has been done over the years to get to this point.

Public anticipation was high, Mr. Roberts said, remarking on the size of the crowd at the ribbon-cutting ceremony. "I didn't realize how big it was until there was an announcement that the pool was done, and then the phone calls started coming."

James Benton, principal of J Benton Construction, called the project more than just a job. The construction team "grew up learning how to swim here," he said, "splashing in the water, spending summers with friends and family, and building memories that last a lifetime." With the rehabilitation of the pool complete, Mr. Benton said, those that worked on the project – as well as the wider community – now "get to share the same joy with their children."

"That full circle moment is something truly special," Mr. Benton remarked. "We knew we weren't just restoring a pool, we were restoring a gathering place, a safe haven and a tradition," he said, proudly noting improvements to the facility including an ADA-compliant pool lift as well as a gently sloping beach style entry. "We've made sure this pool welcomes everyone, regardless of age or ability, because we believe everyone deserves the chance to learn, to play, and to belong."

In addition to singing the praises of J Benton as the contractor and Springline Architects, Director of the Office of Disaster Recovery Adrienne Williams-Octalien lauded Kristen Hodge, director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency's Joint Recovery Office in the territory. "She was very passionate about making sure that the territory got what the territory deserves." Noting that Friday was Ms. Hodge's last day in the position, Ms. Williams-Octalien singled her out for special praise. "Thank you so much on behalf of the people of the Virgin Islands for the work that you have done here in the territory."

Meanwhile, Augustin Mason spoke about the family's close ties to the facility, noting the number of Mason family members who worked at the pool over the years. He remarked that when he was younger, he believed it was his family's personal property. "How dare the rest of you all come out here," he remembered thinking as a child. "What are all these people doing at our pool?"

The pool was Vincent Mason's "pride and joy," the younger Mason said. "He took it extremely serious, not just for himself but for the community." Augustin Mason expressed hope that the swimming program pioneered by his father would also be restarted now that the pool is in operation once again. He asked the community to ensure that the agencies responsible for funding the pool's operations and maintaining the infrastructure do so responsibly and diligently, to ensure that it can be enjoyed for years to come.

Senate Vice President Kenneth Gittens reminisced about his time growing up in Frederiksted. "I remember coming here as a young child, splashing in these waters, laughing with family and friends and learning valuable lessons that have stayed with me through life." Police Academy recruits learned water safety in the pool, and young people associated with the Police Athletic League also used the facility for "recreation,

mentorship, and community bonding with other summer camps,” he noted. Mr. Gittens also reminded the audience of the facility's other uses. “I have personally held some of the biggest parties right here, and I am looking forward to doing that in the very near future,” he remarked. “This facility has always been more than just a pool,” said Gittens continued, remarking on how the pool had served as a social hub for members of the Frederiksted community, and indeed for the whole of St. Croix.

As he did at the beginning of the week, Governor Albert Bryan Jr. tied the pool's reopening to the government's thrust towards a healthier community. Children need to get back outside, he said, and the newly reopened pool was just one part of the strategy to encourage more outdoor recreation. “Bring the kids out to participate in keeping our community,” he urged. “Teach them that this is ours so that their kids could be here one day talking about the legacy of Mr. Mason, and the legacy of this community rebuilding stronger than ever.”