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## USVI Attorney Lee Rohn Named Finalist for National Trial Lawyer of the Year Award

**Veteran St. Croix attorney Lee Rohn is named a finalist for Public Justice's Trial Lawyer of the Year Award for her 27-year fight in the Red Dust case, spotlighting the Virgin Islands' role in landmark environmental justice and public interest litigation**

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### Attorney Lee J. Rohn

ST. CROIX — Attorney Lee J. Rohn, a pillar of the Virgin Islands legal community for nearly four decades, has been named a finalist for the prestigious Trial Lawyer of the Year Award, presented annually by the national advocacy organization Public Justice. The award recognizes attorneys whose work has made the most significant contribution to the public interest through

precedent-setting or socially impactful litigation.

Rohn's nomination stems from her role in securing a landmark victory in "In re Red Dust Claims", a case that held an alumina refinery accountable for decades of environmental harm caused by hazardous red mud waste dispersed into nearby neighborhoods on St. Croix. The case, which took 27 years to litigate, brought justice to largely low-income, local residents who had endured the harmful effects of carcinogenic dust for years.

Rohn, alongside her legal team at Lee J. Rohn & Associates, partnered with attorneys Rick Yelton and Jayde Encalade of Burns Charest LLP to lead the complex litigation to a hard-won resolution. "I'm so gratified that the Virgin Islands is being recognized for this," Rohn said during an interview with V.I. Consortium. "I don't think anybody knows that we really do cutting-edge law in the Virgin Islands, and we have enormous problems that people would never think about—like environmental racism."

The Red Dust case is one of three national cases selected as finalists for the award. The others include *Held v. State of Montana*, where the Montana Supreme Court declared that residents have a constitutional right to a stable climate system, and *Wren v. Affinitylifestyles.com Inc.* and *Brown v. Affinitylifestyles.com Inc.*, which resulted in a record \$8.3 billion verdict against a water company found liable for selling drinking water contaminated with a chemical used in rocket fuel.

Rohn expressed both surprise and deep appreciation at her selection. "This is only given once a year, and it's for people all over the United States and huge cases. Yeah, I mean, it's a big deal," she said.

### **A Legacy of Fighting Injustice**

Reflecting on her decades-long legal career, Rohn recounted her early years in the Virgin Islands, where she confronted entrenched corporate and racial injustice head-on. "When I got here, the refineries and the aluminum refineries were not getting sued," she recalled. "They hired people from down island. If they got injured, they sent them back and didn't take care of them."

Determined to challenge the status quo, Rohn began suing major industrial players, many of whom were long considered untouchable. "There was a view that they were too big to take on," she said. "I came from Texas and had been in a good plaintiffs firm there, and I knew that they put their pants on one leg at a time like everybody else. I was like, no, this isn't gonna go on."

Her legal actions sparked change not only within the corporate sphere but within the territory's social fabric. Rohn described how her discrimination lawsuits against the refinery, located on the south shore of St. Croix, helped open doors for Virgin Islanders previously shut out of leadership positions and higher pay, contributing to the rise of a local middle class.

"Even when we had a refinery, the West Indians weren't making that much money—it was people they were bringing in from the States," she said. "So that created a middle class and then people who could send their kids to better schools and own homes."

### **A Moment for the Territory**

Rohn sees her nomination not just as personal recognition, but as validation for the Virgin Islands and the kind of legal work being done here. "I don't believe it's ever gone to anyone outside of the states," she said. "To be a law firm in the territory is just, you know, astounding—that people will

hear about this case and hear about the injustice.”

Of the original ten nominations, only three made it to the final round this year. “Actually being a finalist is amazing,” she said. “I’m not going to be quibble about whether I win or not.”

The winner of the 2025 Trial Lawyer of the Year Award will be announced at the Public Justice gala on July 21.

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