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Virgin Islands–Puerto Rico Friendship Celebration Honors Legacy of Shared Culture and Community Bonds

Four honorees—educator Arthur Peterson Jr., athlete Michelle Smith, businessman José Luis Saldana, & community leader Carmen Gladys Félix Encarnación—embodied the friendship’s spirit as leaders called for preserving the cultural ties linking both islands.

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Scenes of VI-PR Friendship Celebration 2025 at Gov't House, St. Croix. By. DEAR PRODUCTIONS.

ST. CROIX — The Virgin Islands–Puerto Rico Friendship Celebration on Thursday centered its program on four honorees whose work and life stories reflect the long, intertwined history of the

two communities, underscoring themes of mentorship, cultural preservation, entrepreneurship, and athletic excellence.

Committee president Luis Torres framed the evening's intent plainly: "As we continue the tradition, we will keep this culture going, because it's something that we don't want to die out." He thanked committee members, sponsors, and the Office of the Governor for sustaining a celebration he described as the work of "day and night."

The first presentation honored Dr. Arthur Cedric Peterson Jr., recognized for decades of service in agriculture and education. A Central High graduate who earned degrees from Cornell University, Colorado State University, and the University of Minnesota, Dr. Peterson served as Commissioner of Agriculture and spent a career teaching and advising across the region. Accepting the recognition, he said, "I believe in life that there are three types of people: those who take, those who share, and those who fix things. I am one of those that fix things." He shared a story about a student who asked him to "be my father," using it to press a larger point: "Sometimes those children just want love and somebody to believe in them. You can make a difference in people's lives with just being positive and showing love."

Rising track standout Michelle Smith was saluted next for a résumé that already includes multiple CARIFTA golds (2022 and 2023), a 2025 school record in the 400-meter hurdles at the University of Georgia, and international medals at the 2025 World University Games and the under-23 Pan American Games. Her parents accepted on her behalf and highlighted the competition pipeline connecting the islands. "We go to Puerto Rico about five times every year, and she actually holds a couple of records there," her father said, noting the consistent welcome the Virgin Islands contingent receives: "They treat us like family."

Businessman and community advocate José Luis Saldana was recognized for a lifetime of enterprise and public-minded work rooted in a family migration story from Vieques in the 1930s. Beginning at age 16 with jobs at Woolworth, Grand Union, and Franklin Department Store, he later managed Rancho Alegre, co-founded Colorama Auto Body Supplies and CABS Product Warehouse, rebuilt after Hurricane Hugo, and opened the Warehouse Skating Rink in the 1980s. He also took part in civic initiatives supporting Hispanic media and political engagement. His daughter accepted the award, thanking organizers for honoring a legacy shaped by decades of service to the Virgin Islands and Puerto Rican communities.

The final honoree, Carmen Gladys Félix Encarnación, received a standing ovation. Born in Vieques, she came to St. Croix as a child when her mother brought the family over to join her father. She grew up around Mount Pleasant, became a familiar face at cultural events, and remained active in church and community life. Speaking briefly in Spanish, she said, "Gracias a las personas que me apoyaron," offering thanks to her family and those who carry forward the friendship between the islands.

In closing remarks, Acting Governor Tregenza Roach placed the night's tributes within a longer arc of movement and exchange. "You cannot come to a Virgin Islands–Puerto Rico Friendship Celebration without thinking about migration," he said, tracing ties back to the 1850s, when some Puerto Ricans arrived seeking freedom before emancipation on the Spanish islands in 1873, and when Virgin Islanders also moved in search of opportunity. He pointed to food, music, and tradition that remain "so very much a part of this culture," and urged residents to keep them alive through practice: "Are you losing it because somebody's taking it away," he asked, "or are you losing it because you're not practicing it?" He concluded, "The Virgin Islands is grateful... Muchas gracias a la gente Hispania, mucha gracia a friendship y el poder del amor."

Beyond the presentations, the committee acknowledged volunteer contributions with tokens of appreciation, including to Amy Parker, Emino Torres, and Victor Morales. After the formal program, attendees moved to the Government House lawn, where band performances and an informal reception extended the celebration and gave guests time to connect across generations and communities.

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