

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Gilbert: Paradise In Distress, Paradise Nonetheless

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Ernice Gilbert **August 18, 2014**



I'm young. Originally from the Island of Dominica in the West Indies, I started my back-and-forth journey to St. Croix in 1995 when my mother secured me a visitor's visa from the U.S. Embassy in Barbados. It was the first time I would travel outside my homeland and onto new soil, and while I fully expected to enjoy the United States Virgin Islands, I never dreamed it would become my home.

Every summer I would travel to St. Croix, lived mostly in Peter's Rest and Castle Coakley, and the young boys in said communities became my friends. It was almost like I was born on St. Croix because of how deep my ties became, so when I officially moved to the Island in 2001 after high school, the transition was seamless. I had already been almost everywhere on St. Croix, had visited St. Thomas, and was familiar with the culture

and the operation of the people. In essence, the move to St. Croix was natural.

And oh how beautiful an Island! The people! They are loving, kind, hard-working and diligent. The natural beauty of St. Croix is unmatched. The beaches are white and sandy, the heritage rich and entertaining and the food is so tasty you'll automatically lick your fingers.



Fort Frederik, St. Croix

The women on St. Croix are amongst the fairest in the world. *Ask anybody who knows.* Virgin Islanders also love to party, so on any given weekend, there's a fete in every corner of St. Croix and St. Thomas. And just so you get some perspective, I'm writing this thinking of the here and now, not back in 2001 when things were miles better than they are today. In 2001, we lived a higher quality of life because, amongst other factors, the Hovensa oil refinery was operational and employed thousands. It's now shuttered, bringing down countless businesses with it, and forcing many of the Island's skilled people to seek employment elsewhere on the mainland.

Hovensa's closure was just one piece of many parts that would forge a perfect storm leading to the worst economic depression that the Virgin Islands, more pointedly St Croix, has ever seen. Our water and power bills are the highest in the United States, forcing some to choose between keeping the lights on and eating. Many have chosen the latter. Add to that the effects of America's own economic turmoil that has lead to the government cutting back on Federal aid, and you'll understand the times we're now living through in the Virgin Islands.

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People have been cutting back because now more than ever they have to prioritize where their monies will be spent. Some private schools have shuttered and others decided to merge because parents can't afford the premium tuition fees private education demands. Parts of our towns in Christiansted and Frederiksted that were once epicenters of commerce have been lowered to arid localities, and our tourism product on St. Croix, already malnourished, has suffered because the Senate body hasn't passed meaningful legislation that would see St. Croix becoming a premier Caribbean destination. *Things have been bad.*



Point Udall, St. Croix VI

Yet we are optimistic. The problems of the Virgin Islands have been shaded by the dynamism of its people. We act as if nothing ever happened. Our faces tell tales of resilience and our posture of confidence and poise. Forecasters say there's no work yet we find work. They claim St. Croix is dying yet we believe that this is just the beginning. We enjoy our beaches, we bask in the tropical breeze accented by the sun's rays. We are hopeful and strong, and our resolve will be known long when these difficult days are gone.

I'm young. 32 to be precised, and married to a prepossessing Crucian woman, my wife Charlene. My parents tell me the golden years of the Virgin Islands were during the 1980s when things were cheap and jobs were in the abundance. I tell them that the best is yet to come. They refuse to believe me.

In the news now, the V.I.'s Water and Power Authority has revealed that come early 2015, Virgin Islanders will see savings of 30 percent on their water and power bills. Rumors are ricocheting the V.I. about a sale of the Hovenssa refinery to be followed by an announcement of its reopening. And we are about to change leaders -- Governor and Lieutenant Governor and Senators on November 4th, 2014. Believe me, something good is about to happen.

Paradise in distress is paradise nonetheless. And soon paradise in distress will be paradise, the best.