

The Virgin Islands Consortium

THE BIG INTERVIEW: Coffelt On Stamping Out Corruption, Attracting New Business, And Why The VI Should Choose Her As Its Next Governor

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When the race for Governor began in earnest, Soraya Diase-Coffelt was not the highest on the pundits' list. A former judge with a distinctive voice, when Coffelt announced she would run for the highest office of the territory, most people shrugged, after all, Donna Christensen, Kenneth Mapp and Adlah Donastorg were in the race. They were the horses that people placed their bets on, as the aforementioned are some of the most popular names in Virgin Islands politics.

What if we elect a governor or a group of senators who are associated with Alvin Williams and his corruption, how disgraceful it would be to us. We would be entangled in prosecution and corruption in a criminal case, rather than rebuilding our economy and focusing on all the issues that are challenging us, and that's why I said let me start talking about corruption, let's make a strong commitment to start eradicating corruption.

But a few months later, Judge Coffelt is hoping to pull an upset and win the November 4 General Election, riding the wave of a recent surge in popularity stemming from her defeat of the St. Thomas Board of Elections in the Third Circuit Court of Appeals, after the Board had sought to remove her name from the ballot, claiming she was not eligible to run for office because her running mate was a Republican, and she was an independent candidate.

Now, it seems, everyone is talking about Coffelt. Some say she is clean, that she hasn't been involved in corruption, and that she's the only one who would cause meaningful change. The *VI Consortium* wanted to know if those claims were true, and in a long-ranging interview with this reporter, Coffelt shared her vision for the United States Virgin Islands.

Video and Photo Credit: Kendall Jones

View the original embedded media (unavailable in the recovered archive)

Q: *How do you feel about your prospects of winning?*

Coffelt: I feel wonderful! I'm energized, we're hopeful, and just getting a lot of very positive feedback.

A governor is the lead negotiator, a governor reviews contracts, reads a lot, speaks to people and that's all that I'm trained to do, and I would rather be the one leading, than the one following. And every contract that I would review, I would say, is it in the best interest of the people of the Virgin Islands. Every negotiation I would go into -- [like I've said] I do my research and I prepare, and I would go in also with a team of lawyers who may pick up something I may have missed, but it would always be in negotiating what is in the best interest of the people of the Virgin Islands.

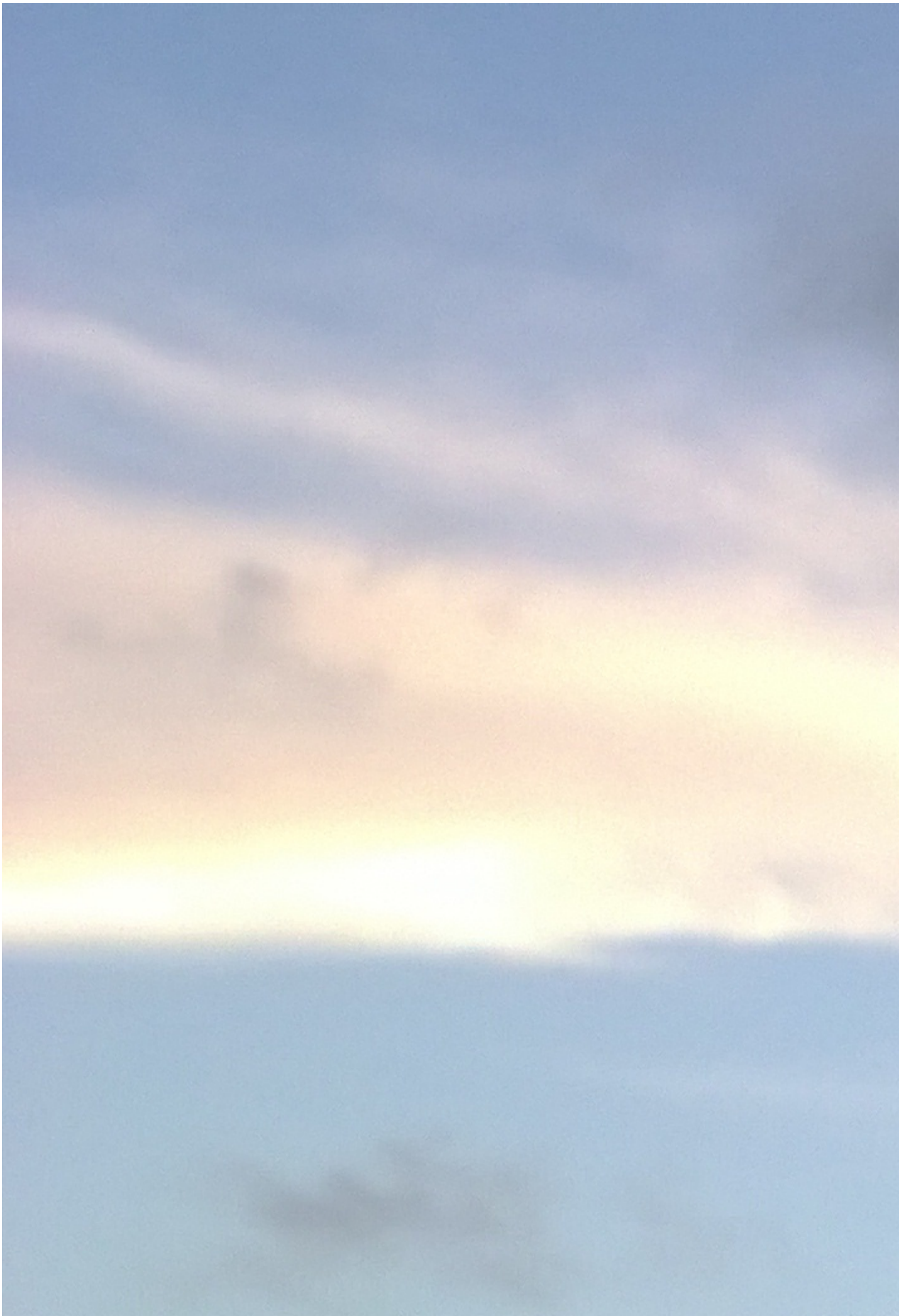
Q: *You recently came out strong against corruption, mentioning the Alvin Williams case, and it caused a big stir -- a positive one on your behalf. Why did you come out so strongly against corruption?*

Coffelt: I'm a former judge. I was six and a half years as a judge, in the St. Thomas-St. John Division, at the Superior Court, and I handle a lot of cases [and] saw a lot of crime come before me. But as I travel the islands, now that I have declared that I'm going to run for governor, people are telling me, what are the top two issues: the very high cost of electricity, and corruption.

I had started to talk about it on one of your radio shows, and after that, we started to get a tremendous amount of feedback -- people [would] say, 'talk more about it.' And the more I thought about it, the more I say yes, certainly. And then the Alvin Williams case

came to my mind and it's been really bothering me because I believe he plead guilty in January of 2013, and we still don't know the total ramifications of the corruption surrounding him. And he made a statement through his attorney, and he said he hoped that justice would be served. Well, justice has not been served as far as I'm concerned because we the people still do not know who are the people involved in the corruption with him.













I believe Alvin Williams is a small fish. He as a small fish and the little fishes surrounding him, a few of them have been arrested and prosecuted, and jailed. But, I believe there are much bigger fishes. And what really bothers me is, there's a lot of rumors in the community that some of these big fishes are running for the Senate, or are running for governor, or are associated with people running for the Senate and running to be governor.

It's really concerning to me that we could elect individuals who have tentacles reaching all the way back to Alvin Williams. And what is much more upsetting is that the federal government has been controlling this investigation and prosecution, and they have their own timetable, which is not the people of the Virgin Islands' timetable, and I feel that we are the ones who are being taken advantage of; we are the ones not receiving justice.

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Q: *People out there are looking at you and saying, 'You know what, she's looking good,' but they are leaning to Mapp, they are leaning to Donna, and probably leaning to Mona Barnes, why should they take that chance with you?*

Coffelt: Well, look at my diverse background. And what's better than having a lawyer and a former judge as heading the government. What is it that governors do? Sit back and think about it. A governor is the lead negotiator, a governor reviews contracts, reads a lot, speaks to people and that's all that I'm trained to do, and I would rather be the one leading, than the one following. And every contract that I would review, I would say, is it in the best interest of the people of the Virgin Islands. Every negotiation I would go into, [like I've said] I do my research and I prepare, and I would go in also with a team of lawyers who may pick up something I may have missed, but it would always be in negotiating what is in the best interest of the people of the Virgin Islands.

And, no other team has the skill set that John and I bring, no other team has the family background that John and I bring. I was married almost 30 years before my late husband passed away. I was a caregiver to him, he suffered from Parkinson's disease, as well as a stroke, and I took care of him. John has been married for 14 years, has a daughter; I have two sons. We show commitment to family values. We show commitment to honor, integrity and respect. And that's what we would bring to government.

Q: *What else, apart from the economy, coming into office, would you tackle.*

Coffelt: Education. I want to be the education governor. I want to make sure that our children can read -- and read to grade level. I want to start as President Obama has been promoting, from pre-K, teaching our children to read, but not wait until third grade to test them as to their reading level. I want them to start learning at pre-K and then we test them every year until third grade.

Why is third grade so important? Because in third grade they test them [and] when they transition to fourth grade, it's no longer learning to read; it's reading to learn. So they've

shown statistically that those students who don't learn to read by third grade, they are the ones more than likely to drop out of schools.

If we can get a grasp on that, and really promote literacy, it would be the teachers understanding more the importance of literacy, it would be the parents understanding the importance of literacy and the community understanding that.

We have public libraries that should be opened. I met with a group of librarians and they gave me their ideas — they're just chomping at the bit — they want a governor who is going to be promoting literacy and opening these libraries, because they're treasure troves. I grew up in libraries, myself, but I want to be the education governor promoting literacy.

View the video interview for Coffelt's ideas on business, marijuana, same-sex marriage and economic development.

Video and Photo Credit: Kendall Jones

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