

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Faith, Unity And A Colorful Parade Mark VI/PR Friendship 51st Golden Jubilee Anniversary

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ST. CROIX -- The VI/PR Friendship weekend kicked off last Thursday with a gospel concert at the Canegata Ballpark in Christiansted, where local and foreign performers were tasked with setting the stage for what was expected to be an eventful four days, as the Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico celebrate their longstanding relationship dating back to the early 1900s.

Though the concert's turnout was soft -- attributed to rainfall and rumors on social media that the opener had been canceled, according to one of the event's organizers -- the launch event saw participation by several dignitaries hailing from the neighboring commonwealth, in a show of unity for a relationship that has benefited both sides.

VI/PR Friendship Committee President Lilliana Belardo de O'Neal told The Consortium that the idea behind the gospel concert was to help steer the territory's youth back on course.





Governor Kenneth Mapp and revelers pose for a picture.



















"We decided to open with a gospel night because we need the prayers," she said. "The Virgin Islands is going through a crisis. When you have a famine (drought) situation, when you have our youths being shot everyday, an increase of crime and all these different things, I believe that it's the power of prayer and putting God in our lives, community and environment is what will cause things to get better. We've lost touch with God."

According to Mrs. de O'Neal, the VI/PR Friendship weekend of events also coincides with Hispanic Heritage month, which runs from September 15 through October 15. She also recounted the early difficulties that marked the Hispanics' migration to the Virgin Islands.

Puerto Rican descendants started to migrate to the territory in 1917, According to Mrs. de O'Neal, with the largest flow of immigrants coming in 1927. Following their arrival to the islands, Mrs. de O'Neal said the Puerto Ricans started organizing themselves "and became such a powerful group that the Legislature, in its wisdom, decided to pass resolution 1075 (51 years ago) mandating that a day be set aside to honor and recognize Puerto Ricans who contributed to the social and economical growth of the territory."



Governor Kenneth Mapp and revelers

pose for a picture.

In the past, the event was marked by a simple luncheon, but it was drastically expanded to include other activities when former Governor Juan F. Luis took office, with the changes being led by his wife.

The following day at the same location, Governor Kenneth Mapp, sitting alongside PR dignitaries and local officials, welcomed the PR delegates and declared that he was "very proud" to be at the event. Mapp said he started attending VI/PR Friendship celebrations while a staff member in the Governor Luis administration, making known that Mr. Luis and his family helped him to more intimately understand the strong links between PR, Vieques, Fajardo and the VI.

And while the celebrations include all the islands in the territory, Mapp pinpointed St. Croix, where the relationship is the strongest, and noted the great food as one of the many benefits of the decades-old relationship.

"While we love all of the Virgin Islands, when people come to St. Croix from St. John and St. Thomas, they take home food," Mapp said, suggesting that the Puerto Rican seasoning, mixed with St. Croix's own flavoring, make for a special combination the other islands can't duplicate.

The jubilee went into full throttle following the various talks, with both local and PR bands sparking elation as people intermingled, ate and danced.

Saturday night saw a state dinner reception) at Government House here, and on Sunday at 1:00 p.m., the traditional parade, including troupes, local queens and other groups that are usually seen during carnival season, danced through Christiansted -- from the Basin Triangle to the Canegata Ballpark -- and continued with more activities there.

Today, of course, is Virgin Islands/Puerto Rican Friendship Day. It's also Columbus Day here and in the U.S. Governor Mapp on Friday ordered that PR and VI flags be flown side-by-side at all Government House properties in the territory.

"As we welcome the 51st Virgin Islands / Puerto Rico Friendship celebration, this weekend, let's celebrate our shared genealogy and heritage. Through our blended cultures, we have truly become "One People". I urge everyone to enjoy the many

wonderful entertaining and educational activities planned for this weekend, as we continue to write a uniquely Caribbean story," Mapp.

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