

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Is She It? Allison DeGazon, With Qualities Fit For Leadership, Announces Run For Senate

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ST. CROIX -- She sat in the lobby of the Viya building for an interview with The Consortium on Wednesday, ready to tell her story. Moments earlier, she had spoken with some hospital employees who had yet to receive unemployment after being let go from the Juan F. Luis Hospital, assuring them, "I am now your voice." Astutely she sat, her eyes giving away a passion and determination to do something about the state of the territory. She came off as bold and intelligent, and as someone who knew her stuff. This reporter hurled a few pointed questions at her, attempting to learn of her preparation for the office that she seeks. Each time, however, the interviewee did not only answer the questions, she gave rare answers that, if implemented, could shift the territory upwards.

Her name is Allison L. DeGazon, a well-educated Virgin Islander born on St. Croix, who, after serving for multiple years in a variety of capacities, and with the future of the territory and her children on the forefront of her mind, decided to run for Senate in the 2018 election as a Democrat. In many ways, she represents the ideal candidate that residents have been calling for: At 43 years of age, she is young. Although she has served in important capacities in government, she still feels like an outsider looking in, whose ideas were many times utilized even as she received little credit. As the owner of a consulting firm, she has experienced meeting the necessary criteria but still being pushed aside while others, especially firms from outside, scored contracts. As a farmer with a piece of property spanning 11 acres, she knows all too well the struggles faced by local farmers, and the scarcity of resources at the Department of Agriculture to help these farmers succeed.

"I've seen how local people don't get a chance to take part in these big contracts and in these opportunities," Ms. DeGazon said. "Even though we're talented, we're set aside to help the people that's there and we're paid almost nothing."

Ms. DeGazon recalled her time at the Department of Labor (D.O.L.) as director of the Division of Unemployment Insurance, where she witnessed what she said were disheartening moments when HOVENSA closed and residents long employed at the shuttered oil refinery had to transition and find new jobs. "We lost almost a whole generation of men moving to the states because there's no opportunities here -- including my little brother, who now is away from my parents who are elders, and we should be here helping them," Ms. DeGazon said, her voice cracking as she spoke.

While at D.O.L., Ms. Degazon said she secured \$12 million in federal grants in two years. "So I know that they're willing to give us the money, but when we bring it here we don't know how to manage it. We don't know how to use it to hire people -- bring people back home and keep the money flowing," she said.

As a former assistant director of the Virgin Islands Territorial Emergency Management Agency (V.I.T.E.M.A.), Ms. DeGazon said a lot was done to prepare the territory for the 2017 hurricane season, but added there was a lot of room for improvement. "Like working closer with the agencies and going out and helping them with their plans and so forth. It's not only about sitting down behind a desk, it's about getting out there," she said.

Throughout the interview, Ms. DeGazon's passion remained consistent. Her tagline, she said, is "Playtime is Over", stressing that Virgin Islands leaders must elevate their mindset and practices to a global level. "It can no longer be the same. We have to strategize differently, we have to think differently, we have to think on a global level and bring it local," she said.

On platform goals, Ms. DeGazon said if elected, she would work to increase the amount of federal dollars coming into the territory. "It can be done," she emphasized. "I did it, I oversaw that." She said competent individuals with the expertise in writing grants should be hired, as well as capable managers to oversee the funds' distribution.

She also intends to stop what she said was the decline in businesses coming to the territory, as well as the decline in local businesses being established. The candidate spoke of the Small Business Administration and the Economic Development Authority as

two entities that help both small and big establishments. "But there's no follow-through," Ms. DeGazon noted, "so we end up having to figure these things out ourselves. Ms. DeGazon also decried what she described as a "pyramid of taxes" levied against local businesses. "If we bring the right businesses in, we can relieve the taxes on local businesses," she said.

Ms. DeGazon, a single mother with four children, said for three years the Bureau of Internal Revenue has been auditing her, a story, she added, is not unique to her but is shared by many Virgin Islanders. "There has to be a streamlined procedure as to who gets audited, whose overseeing the audits, and if they're personal," she said.

Other items in her plan include giving local vendors a fair chance to win projects, and taking deregulatory action while altering policies that she says work to stifle business growth. "The government process is not business-friendly," she said. Ms. DeGazon also hopes to help more men complete high school and attend college, including an initiative that pays them to learn programs and gives incentives for increased digital literacy.

Ms. DeGazon is pursuing her PhD at the University of the Virgin Islands (U.V.I.) and is set to graduate in 2019. Her dissertation is "Government Intervention: Does it enable or does it hinder the development of business?" She described the U.V.I. program as one of high quality that demands rigorous effort by participants. And the PhD program has enabled her run, she said, giving her the skills to match her passion for a better Virgin Islands.

"Our assignments aren't typical assignments. It's solving problems, coming up with inventions, stretching your mind, and as a product of the Virgin Islands, I think it's time for me to be in place to be able to offer those ideas and that energy, and even to answer the call to help the people with the pain that they're going through financially," she said.

"Passion is good, but you need to have intellect and know-how. You have to know how to write the legislation, you have to know how to lobby, you have to know who to speak to, you have to know when it's time to reach out, when government has to step back, or when government has to lead," the candidate added.

Ms. DeGazon believes the U.S. Virgin Islands should be a leader in the Caribbean, with influence to shape policy and behaviors throughout the region. But many other Caribbean islands, some with help of other nations, others with their own resources, have pulled ahead of the territory, a reality she hopes to change by affecting change that would thrust the U.S.V.I. atop.

"I'm looking at Aruba, which is the richest Caribbean country right now. Second is Trinidad, third is Bahamas. What is Aruba doing? They have the Netherlands that helps them, we have the U.S. mainland. They had a refinery that closed, their refinery is reopening. When the recession was going, their banks were doing well. Their unemployment is low, they have just about the same amount of people as us here. They are part of the ABC islands, we're part of the Virgin Islands. Why is it that they're number 1? Why can't we be number 1? So I am actively studying that infrastructure to understand what government interventions took place to be able to get them forging forward like that, so that I could bring a similar model to the territory."

