

The Virgin Islands Consortium

USVI's 101 Birthday Celebrated With Low-Key Event At St. George Botanical Garden

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ST. CROIX -- The U.S. Virgin Islands on Saturday realized its 101st birthday as an American territory. On March 31, 1917, the territory was transferred to America from Denmark for \$25 million in gold coin. The milestone has been recognized ever since, with many hesitating to call the event a celebration in protest of the territory's residents' second-class citizen status, as U.S. citizens living in the U.S. Virgin Islands are unable to vote for president.

But on Saturday at the Botanical Garden in St. George on St. Croix, local leaders including Governor Kenneth Mapp and Delegate to Congress Stacey Plaskett, along with representatives from Denmark and the U.S. Department of Interior, chose

to celebrate the territory's 101st American birthday, hoping to move past the history and look to the future.

Even so, the current status was still highlighted by Ms. Plaskett, as she continued her push with a goal to see that Americans in the Virgin Islands of the United States, the islands' correct title, have equal rights as their mainland counterparts. Ms. Plaskett, who does not have a vote on the Congress floor, said, "I've made it a point every time there is a vote to be there to be a reminder of that unequal treatment. I've been on the floor at 3:00 a.m. when other members are there, just so they could recognize there is someone who has the same intellect, the same ability, the same thoughts. Our people have the same passions that the rest of Americans have, but we cannot cast a full and fair equal vote." The crowd applauded.

Guy Hughes, chief resource manager at the U.S. Department of Interior, represented D.O.I. Secretary Ryan Zinke and spoke of the collaboration, especially in the last six months, between the territory and D.O.I. in response to Hurricanes Irma and Maria.

Consul Helle Dyreborg-GunslevAnne, spoke on behalf of Dorte Riggelsen, consul general of Denmark, who could not attend because of a family illness. Ms. Dyreborg-GunslevAnne spoke about the importance of the relationship between the U.S.V.I. and Denmark. She mentioned the commitments made by Denmark President Lars Løkke Rasmussen -- [including a five-year scholarship program](#) -- and said those commitments were being kept. Ms. Dyreborg-GunslevAnne also mentioned the Freedom statue in Denmark as another recognition of the country's strong ties to the U.S.V.I. -- fraught history included.

And she also noted the Denmark government's assistance to the USVI following the 2017 storms, including [the dispatching of Denmark Emergency Management Agency personnel](#), who Ms. Dyreborg-GunslevAnne said did not want to leave the islands because of the hospitality they received.

Governor Kenneth Mapp focused on the recovery of the U.S.V.I., especially what he described as the federal government's commitment to the islands following the 2017 storms. He spoke of billions of dollars set aside to help the U.S. territories, and said that in the coming weeks there would be joint local and federal press conferences to make announcements relative to the rebuilding of schools and other projects. The governor also said that a private sector partner would soon announce an investment of several billion dollars on St. Croix.

"The realization that this territory can in fact have a robust economy, great education and healthcare systems, good security, strong private sector and a real high quality of life for the American citizens living in this territory, are no longer studies, are no longer plans, because the problems are no longer where will the resources come from," Mr. Mapp said. "It's whether we will use our intellect and our discipline, and our maturity to do it the right way and to say to the federal government thank you for the opportunity and opportunities not squandered, but used in an appropriate manner to benefit the American citizens here and move this territory forward into the modern age."

Also speaking during the event was Danish graduate student Kristina Olsen, who expressed strong interest in returning to the territory after spending several months here

as part of her studies.

The celebration concluded with a cake-cutting ceremony and dance performances by the We Deh Ya Cultural Dancers.

Feature Image: From left to right: Delegate to Congress Stacey Plaskett's youngest daughter, Ms. Plaskett, Governor Kenneth Mapp, Senator Sammuel Sanes, and Hans Lawaetz, president of the St. Croix Friends of Denmark. (Ernice Gilbert, VIC)

Correction: April 1, 2018

A previous version of this story referred to the wrong person as Denmark's consul general. It's Dorte Riggelsen, not Helle Dyreborg-GunslevAnne. We've updated the story.

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