

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Javan James And Daren Stevens Struggle To Articulate Legislative Plans During VIPC Interviews

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ST. CROIX -- In the first Virgin Islands Political Consortium (V.I.P.C.) interviews at our broadcast studio Saturday evening, both interviewees Javan James and Daren Stevens failed to clearly articulate legislation they would introduce to help propel the USVI into economic prosperity, stave off collapse of the Government Employees' Retirement System (G.E.R.S.), fix the territory's healthcare system, and introduce legislation that would encourage millennials to start businesses, among other challenges.

The salary of a senator is \$85,000 a year, along with a myriad of perks. The budget of a senator's office is \$380,000 annually, or \$760,000 every two years. (The At-Large seat receives an annual budget of \$475,000 (\$950,000 every two years), while the Senate

president receives an annual appropriation from the \$19 million budget of \$570,000, or \$1,140,000 every two years.)

Lawmakers are responsible for an annual budget that tops \$1 billion. And they deliberate and have the power to fail or ratify critical legislation that could either build or weaken the economy. In essence, lawmakers, as members of the first branch of government, are guardians of all the parts that make up the engine of the U.S. Virgin Islands.

The thinking goes someone who's seeking to become a lawmaker should be learned on the issues that affect these islands -- and should take time to come up with solutions that will either solve or greatly curtail the issues.

But Mr. James and Mr. Stevens, interviewed by VI Consortium President Ernice Gilbert, and the platform's Opinions Editor Ashley Scotland, struggled to bring forth plans for legislation to help move the territory forward.

Asked by Mr. Gilbert for legislative ideas that would ease the burden on young people looking to start businesses in the territory, Mr. James spoke of improvements needed at the Department of Licensing and Consumer Affairs, and encouraged millennials to visit the Small Business Administration for training. He did not give a solution.

Pressed by Mr. Scotland, Mr. James said he would "give millennials discounts on the fees and what have you, for their first year in business to promote entrepreneurship, and from there on you could continue to pay the regular fees... Things like that I would definitely look into. And to be honest with you, this conversation sparked that idea," he said.

Responding to criticism on whether he is prepared to become a senator, Mr. James spoke of his record as a business owner (Super Dad 340) and his time serving as an administrative assistant to Senator Novelle Francis as examples of his experience that have prepared him to serve as a senator. "For those of you who are not in tune with social media and keeping up with Javan James because of the age difference, may not know what I've done. But anybody that knows my record of being a business owner, very active in the community, work in the Senate. I'm not going to explain every single thing that I've accomplished; I don't believe in being that boastful, but I think my record speaks for itself."

Mr. James said he saw the Democratic primary as as a job interview, adding, "and I passed my job interview. So now we have gotten passed that stage, this time around now is being more specific on policies and ideas and presenting myself."

Asked by Mr. Scotland about legislation that he would put forth to stave off collapse of the territory's pension system, G.E.R.S., Mr. James said he visited a recent G.E.R.S. function where Governor Kenneth Mapp spoke on issues facing the system, including the need of \$100 million annually to remain solvent. Going based on the governor's comments, Mr. James said the first thing he would do is infuse cash into the system. "We have to find a way to generate more revenues," he said. Mr. James also agreed with the governor on placing competent individuals on the G.E.R.S. board -- but he did not directly address the question.

After being asked the question a different way, the candidate for Senate said he has placed people on his team that were once part of the Legislature, and they're currently working on legislation that would create a Tier 3 to the current structure of the pension system, which he said would benefit millennials. "Based on the structure we have right now, if we don't create a new tier, then people like ourselves are in trouble."

Staying on the topic, Mr. Gilbert responded by stating that a Tier 3 would be useless with a system that is facing collapse in 2023. And he pressed Mr. James for specific ideas that would generate funding. Mr. James then pointed to what he said was his background in the music industry, and said hosting big shows throughout the year, along with the construction of new hotels that would accommodate visitors coming in from "all around the world," would help. The candidate also said that the idea is based on a long-term projection.

G.E.R.S., however, needs funding immediately.

Mr. James admitted to not having yet analyzed the market to get a clear understanding on the amount of funds the entertainment plan would generate, and how G.E.R.S. would benefit. But he did say he has the legislation in place already. Asked about the content of the legislation, Mr. James said he was not attempting to reinvent the wheel. "Some people expect people [to] just come with imaginary things. We have a good system in place, all it requires is just enforcement and appropriation of funds," Mr. James said. He then offered a scattershot commentary on the Department of Tourism's Ambassador program, stating that more of the local artists needed to be given the title from D.O.T., and that D.O.T. needed to promote these artists more. This would encourage more tourists to visit the territory, and the territory in turn would see new dollars, Mr. James said.

"That's my idea to generate revenues," he said. "To some it might seem that it's not important, but that's why we need a diverse legislature."

Mr. James was later asked what role he believes the Senate plays in improving the territory's healthcare system, and what type of legislation would a Senator James introduce to aid in making it better. Mr. James never answered the question. Instead, he kept reverting to a line that argues against making promises that are not achievable, even if the question never asked him to make such a promise.

"When you hear senators say that 'I'm going to do this and I'm going to do that', and when they go in there they realize that they can't do it because the funding is not there. I'm not going to put myself in a trap where I'm making these big promises and when you go in there you don't know what kind of budget [will be available]."

Finally, Mr. James, who has been promoting his relationship with his fiancé and their children as a proud example of a nuclear family in the territory, with many pictures on social media that goes along with his Proud Parent brand, was asked a simple enough question about the relationship by Mr. Gilbert, which was, "When is the big day coming? When are we going to hear about marriage?" To this, Mr. James said, "Well, right now we're engaged. I live a very private life. If someone chooses to look into it, be my guest but we live a very private life. When we chose to do that it was only about 5-10 people there. She likes to be in the background and I'm not going to use this platform to speak

about her. We plan to do that definitely when the time is right."

Asked if this was the first time he would be getting married, Mr. James first said, "This will be my first time getting into a relationship Shemira and tying the knot. He later said that it would be the first time he was getting married. Mr. Gilbert then revealed to Mr. James that he had heard of talk that he was married before, and asked that Mr. James clarify. But the candidate would only say, "I won't discuss that. I will be honest with you... Aye, people ain't easy out here, you know. All I will say is this, Ernice Gilbert, Shemira and I plan to get married and I will leave it as that."

For the record, there is nothing wrong with being divorced, and no one said there was. But there should also not be anything wrong with being truthful about it.

Daren Stevens

Mr. Stevens said he had to step up to the challenge because "my people need help, and I know the cry of the people. I'm in the trenches; I come from the trenches, and I stay in the trenches."

Asked by Mr. Scotland what type of change he would bring to the territory, Mr. Stevens said, "Over the years -- I'm going back 40 years ago -- we had leaders, great leaders. This world was a better place with leaders. Now basically what we have today is a lot of politicians. And I don't have anything against politicians, but we need some leaders. And leaders are those who care about their community... So basically I'm trying to bring leadership skills."

A follow-up from Mr. Scotland sought answers on legislation Mr. Stevens would introduce as a lawmaker. The candidate said he intends to stick within the confines of his platform, which he said was education. "The education system needs to be revamped," he said. "We cannot continue to just drive our children down the academic road when you have done studies that says that everyone does not learn the same."

Mr. Stevens spoke of reopening a vocational program at the St. Croix Central High School, which he said has been dormant for some time, and has forced the C.H.S. students to be bused every morning to the St. Croix Educational Complex for their vocational classes. Mr. Stevens was not sure whether he wanted to introduce legislation to rectify the matter, or attempt to use his influence as a senator if elected to try and restart the program at C.H.S. -- which he said already has the space for the classes.

Mr. Stevens also spoke of a program that would see the government helping college students with their loans, and in turn these students, upon graduation, would work for the government for a certain period.

On helping grow the territory's faltering cruise industry, Mr. Stevens said the new ships being built include so many amenities that some passengers don't see the need to de-board. Therefore, he said, the territory should look to other avenues such as sports, health and agriculture tourism. He said the Department of Tourism has been spending too much of its advertising dollars on outside firms to market the territory. Instead, Mr. Stevens suggested using local Virgin Islanders who he said have the skills to perform the work.

But the candidate, while jumping from one issue to the next, did not give a clear outline of what exactly would be done through his office, which suggested that he needed to study the matter further to better outline his plans. Pressed by Mr. Scotland for details, Mr. Stevens said, "I do understand what you're saying, but also listen to this: everything does not have to be done by legislation. Things could be done by sharing ideas and networking between the different branches of government."

Both Mr. Gilbert and Mr. Scotland reminded Mr. Stevens that as a senator, his primary function is to legislate, while the executive branch executes.

Mr. Stevens then attempted to outline a plan: "We need to get some incentive programs for young people with the creative ideas who are going to contribute to the tourism product," he said. This would include providing funding to help start businesses.

"Not just any business, you must be contributing to tourism to be able to get the incentive," he said.

Mr. Stevens said he would like to see the territory's carnival (and festivals) become a direct branch under the Department of Tourism.

On helping to save the pension system, Mr. Stevens spoke of a G.E.R.S.-funded supermarket similar to Sams Club. "It will create revenues and it will be the members of G.E.R.S." He also spoke of employing additional government workers, "Because the government workers are the ones who pay for the retirees.

Pressed on whether he had done some research and analyzed the impact of his supermarket plan relative to providing funding to G.E.R.S., the candidate admitted that he hadn't researched any comprehensive plan for G.E.R.S.

"My platform, basically, was not based on G.E.R.S.," he said, "but I've thought of ideas."

The full interviews are [here](#).

*Feature Image: From left to right: Ernice Gilbert, Javan James, and Ashley Scotland.
(Credit: Cruselda Roberts, VIC)*