The Virgin Islands Consortium

'I Work Harder Than Golden': Stephanie Barnes Takes Stand in Her Own Defense as Trial Nears End

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The Casino Control Commission headquarters on St. Croix. **By. ERNICE GILBERT/ V.I. CONSORTIUM**

Stephanie Barnes, the former Casino Control Commission contractor who in 2019 was charged by the federal government with conspiracy to commit theft from programs and receiving federal funds in violation of U.S. law, receipt of stolen government monies, and filing a false tax return in violation of Virgin Islands law, took the stand in her defense on Tuesday after none of 15 witnesses showed up to testify on her behalf.

Included on the list of witnesses was Governor Albert Bryan. The governor's name on the list appears to be tied to the V.I.C.C.C. contract that was given to Ms. Barnes in 2015 over many others who had bid for the work, including either Mr. Bryan or a company he worked for at the time. Former Governor John P. de Jongh was also on the list.

On Tuesday, at the District Court on St. Croix, Judge Robert Molloy listened as Ms. Barnes was questioned under oath by U.S. Assistant Attorney Jill Koster, who in her opening remarks on Dec. 8 said Ms. Barnes "knew what was in [Violet Anne Golden's] wallet," referring to the hundreds of thousands of dollars of taxpayer money that was said to be expended during the time of the alleged crimes from the beginning of Ms. Barnes's employment in April 2015 through 2018.

Some of the statements made by Attorney Koster during her opening remarks on Dec. 8 were directed at Ms. Barnes Tuesday. The prosecution spent a considerable amount of time questioning Ms. Barnes on taxes related to the charge of filing a false tax return in violation of Virgin Islands law.

When shown the 720 C business tax form by Atty. Koster, Ms. Barnes apparently could not recognize the document, though she said it was her signature at the bottom. Shown the figures on the taxes, Ms. Barnes said she did not know how they came about and blamed Ms. Golden for making the numbers up.

Ms. Golden on Dec. 14 testified that she helped her former friend and alleged co-conspirator by assisting Ms. Barnes with preparing her 2016 taxes. A draft of those tax return documents was published in evidence and showed that Barnes owed the B.I.R. $33,124. According to Ms. Golden, Barnes said that she could not pay that amount, so Ms. Golden sought to help her friend out by issuing a letter stating that some 1099s had to be corrected. She then adjusted some figures in Quickbooks, an accounting software, and issued Ms. Barnes a corrected 1099 that allowed her to pay back less in taxes. Golden said that Barnes knew that number was not accurate. “She benefitted,” Golden said in response to the prosecution asking who benefitted from that fraudulent act. Golden admitted to knowing that what she was doing was wrong.

On Tuesday, Ms. Barnes under pointed questioning from Attorney Koster provided responses that cast doubt on her version of what happened. At one point she said a B.I.R. agent advised her to file a tax return different from the document showing she made $155,925, which ultimately meant she would not have to pay the $33,124, according to Attorney Koster.

Ms. Barnes then said she was forced to report that amount to the B.I.R. Pressed on the matter, she restated that she was informed by the B.I.R. agent to file the document. However, when asked by Ms. Koster whether she was forced to take payments from the C.C.C. during the time she was contracted to perform work, Ms. Barnes then said she was never forced to do anything, and that everything she did she did so on her own accord.

Judge Molloy on a number of occasions warned Ms. Barnes against making general statements when she was asked for direct yes or no responses from Attorney Koster.

According to the 1099 tax form, Ms. Barnes made $155,925, which was more than Ms. Golden's $105,000 annual payment as V.I.C.C.C. chairwoman. “I work harder than Golden,” she said in justifying her pay.

A closer look at the 2016 tax filing showed total compensation amounted to 175,925, or $20,000 above the $155,925. Barnes stated it was for reimbursement. When asked what was reimbursed, Barnes said she used her personal money to purchase food and materials for V.I.C.C.C. It was an out-of-pocket expense, she said. When asked for the receipts, she said after her home was compromised during the storms of 2017, she lost some of them. However, Ms. Golden, she said, had most of the receipts, though she didn't know what Ms. Golden did with the receipts.

At one point Ms. Barnes said it was hard to listen as Ms. Golden "disparaged" her. But it was Ms. Barnes's attorney, Martial Webster, who on Dec. 8 first started to cast blame on Ms. Golden. He said Ms. Golden had money problems and had maxed out twelve credit cards. Atty. Webster stated that contrary to what the prosecution said, Ms. Barnes did not know what was in Ms. Golden's wallet, an assertion appearing to support the defense's narrative that while Ms. Barnes traveled a number of times with Ms. Golden and partook in many activities together, she did not know that it was the V.I.C.C.C.'s money being spent.

"Anne Golden is not on trial; her conduct is not on trial," Mr. Webster reminded on Dec. 8, trying to distance his client from Ms. Golden, who pleaded guilty to theft of government money and failing to file a tax return — crimes for which she served two years in prison.

Closing arguments for the case could be held today if no more witnesses are called, and jury deliberation would follow.