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'He Ripped My Underwear Off': Woman Comes Forward With Sexual Harassment Allegation Against Senator Steven Payne

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Chezni Jones

Days after the territory learned that an employee in Senator Steven Payne's office had [accused him of sexual harassment](#) during a work trip, a social media post from four years ago has come to light, in which a different woman recounted what she said was her own experience with the man she described as a "father figure".

On January 5, 2018, Chezni Jones posted to the "What's Going on St. Thomas?" Facebook group. She shared a repost of comments made on her own Facebook account, which described a day in 2005 when a much-younger Jones accompanied the senator to a beach in St. John. Payne was an

officer of the V.I. Police Department at the time, who was helping Jones train as part of her efforts to join the police academy, Ms. Jones said. Mr. Payne was assigned to a local school and Jones was an employee at the learning institution. During a series of exclusive interviews with Consortium journalists conducted within the past few days, Ms. Jones recounted her memories of the alleged incident that she said transformed the now-senator in her eyes from trusted mentor to dangerous predator, saying, “He suggested that we go to the beach so that, you know, nobody won’t say anything by seeing us practicing and stuff like that. He felt that we needed to be discreet.”

According to the narrative [posted by Jones in 2018](#), Mr. Payne — who she said she’d trusted as a father figure — had told her back in 2005 that he would assist with her training, and teach her defensive tactics which he said would give her an advantage when it came to her potential policing career. While on breaks at her job, Jones said that Payne would watch her do push-ups. Although Jones said she found it “weird”, she accepted Payne’s explanation that he was checking her form. Years later when Jones posted her experience online, she said it was only hindsight that brought her to the realization that the then-future senator may have been gawking at her body.

On that fateful day at the beach, Jones said that the training session began with Payne teaching her how to break free from someone who had grabbed her from behind, but quickly escalated to a place the much-younger woman was uncomfortable with. In her post from 2018, Jones said that Payne tried to encourage her to grab his testicles, going so far as to explicitly instruct her to do so. Jones said that when she told him that she didn’t want to do that, Payne tore at her underwear and ripped it, at which point she said she “put the brakes on this so-called training.”

Jones further recounts that by that point, it was getting dark, and that Payne noticed that she had become scared and nervous, so he suggested they leave the beach. On the way home, traveling in the marked police vehicle that was assigned to Payne, Jones said she was too scared to honestly answer his questions about her state of mind, telling him instead that she was fine.

“We were in St. John. Anybody who’s been to St. John knows it’s 3/4 National Park — that means nothing but trees. So I was afraid... I didn’t know whether or not this man was looking at me to say ‘Well, you know what? If I think she’s going to say something, I might have to take care of this now to save my career.’ I didn’t know if he was going to do something and drag my body somewhere deep in the woods - I didn’t know. This is a man who’s what, 6’2”, 6’3”? And I’m 5’5”, and at the time I only weighed 125 pounds...I’m afraid of him. He’s bigger than me, and he has a weapon.”

Jones said that subsequently, she told one of Payne’s V.I.P.D. colleagues about her experience, and that police officer asked if she wanted to press charges.

With no concrete evidence to corroborate her story, Jones declined. Jones said she wanted to tell Payne’s wife about her husband’s behavior, but felt that she wouldn’t receive support from that corner either. So, after that day in 2005, Jones said she buried the memory.

She was accepted into the police academy and graduated successfully. Jones went on to serve as a VIPD officer for three years before joining the Army, all while the alleged events of that day remained engraved in her brain. Jones said that that day at the beach marked the end of her “training sessions” with Payne, and that he was never able to look her in the eye after that last interaction.

When Payne decided to throw his hat in the ring and run for one of the territory’s “At-large”

senatorial positions in 2018, Jones decided to tell her story, posting in on the popular local Facebook forum “What’s Happening St. Thomas” on January 5 of that year. Jones received encouragement and support from other commenters in the group for sharing her story, but local media did not pick up on the issue at the time, and Payne went on to secure a seat in the 33rd Legislature. Jones said that she was disappointed but not surprised.

“When he got elected, I was disappointed. I was hoping that maybe the media would have seen my post, somebody would have said something, but nobody reached out. I just figured, knowing how the VI is, that word of mouth, that somebody would have heard it, that somebody would have said, 'You know what? I believe her, I’ve had my own experiences with him,' or 'I know of somebody that has had their own experiences with him, and that is not the man that should represent the Virgin Islands as Senator-at-large.'”

In fact, Payne was re-elected to the Senate in 2020 and is now under investigation by his colleagues for sexual harassment. Jones said that this development is also unsurprising, and dismissed Payne’s demurrals that the accusations — hers and now his young staffer’s — were politically motivated.

“He tried to say the same thing when I came out and told my story, you know? That it was only because he was running for office. But no — I don’t care. I don't care that my name is out there. It doesn't matter to me. Because the truth is the truth and it doesn’t matter who believes it. God knows it, and he knows it.”

Jones said that nobody from the current Senate investigatory team in 34th Legislature has contacted her to learn more about her experience with Senator Payne, but said she would welcome the opportunity to share her story.

Just before filing this report, Consortium journalists contacted Donna Frett-Gregory, president of the 34th Legislature, who told us that the preliminary report from the initial investigation should be on her desk by the end of the day today. Ms. Frett-Gregory, not yet having knowledge of the report’s contents, was unable to disclose whether Payne had provided a response to the investigation by the Friday deadline, and said that the public would be updated on the next steps in due course.

Mr. Payne did not respond to a request for comment regarding the recently-resurfaced allegations made by Ms. Jones in 2018.