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Large Crowds Gather at Canegata Facility to Enjoy Rides, Entertainment and Good Food During 58th VI-PR Friendship Celebrations Saturday

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Eventgoers enjoying rides an the temporary amusement park at the Canegata facility in Christiansted during VI-PR Friendship events Sat., Oct. 8, 2022. By. V.I. CONSORTIUM

Finding close parking to attend V.I.-P.R. Friendship activities at the Canegata Ballpark was a monumental task Saturday night. Vehicles had to line from the descending portion of the Bypass heading east, all the way past Seaside heading further east.

Saturday night's turnout was the largest this reporter has seen in at least 8 years of covering the event, and the overwhelming attendance could be attributed to several factors. Among the reasons, a baseball game between the USVI and Puerto Rico occurring at the same time, a temporary

amusement park that saw long lines snaking around the small space across the Canegata center, and third: Virgin Islanders simply want to be outside following years of pandemic-induced lockdowns.

The Virgin Islands/Puerto Rican Friendship Village opened Friday night and was named in honor of Joseph “Joe” Olmeda during a ceremony. It will now be called the Joseph “Joe” Olmeda Friendship Village.

Mr. Olmeda is a former Friendship Committee president, business owner and a Puerto Rican native who has lived on St. Croix for decades.

Many gathered for the 58th year celebration including senators Javan James, Genevieve Whitaker, Angel Bolques, Kenneth Gittens and Franklin Johnson.

Luis Torres, the current president of VI/PR described Mr. Olmeda as his “icon” and “hero.”

"I feel very fortunate to have had him in my life as he guides me through this big task that I've had to be the VI/PR committee president — a task that I don't take lightly," he said.

Mr. Olmeda said it was a privilege that he would always remember as he thanked committee members and senators for coming out to share the moment with him. “It is my honor and my privilege to accept this recognition as we celebrate and encourage all of us to do so for love, harmony and with safety,” he remarked.

Mr. Olmeda was also presented with a plaque by Governor Albert Bryan Jr. and Lieutenant Governor Tregenza Roach.

"You know, I always say if there's reincarnation I want to come back as a Virgin Islander, but if I can't come back as a Virgin Islander, I want to be a Trini (Trinidadian) or a Puerto Rican," Mr. Bryan remarked during the ceremony. The governor spoke with admiration about the passion of the Puerto Rican people. He recalled traveling to the island commonwealth during the Christmas holidays with his mother, and having a burst of laughter as a taxi driver sped to locations such as Plaza Las Americas, the enormous shopping mall in San Juan. But it was on St. Croix that the governor said he has witnessed the richness of Puerto Ricans, including the food, culture, "and yes, the passion. From dancing to cooking, to just being and living," Mr. Bryan said.

The opening of the Grand Friendship Village forms part of the Virgin Islands-Puerto Rico Friendship Weekend – the first full scale version to take place since the Covid-19 pandemic.

The holiday was created in 1964 after lawmakers mandated that a day be set aside to honor and recognize Puerto Ricans who contributed to the social and economic growth of the territory. It is celebrated in the U.S Virgin Islands on the second Monday of October and coincides with Columbus Day. Village events end today.

The territory reportedly has the second largest Puerto Rican community outside of Puerto Rico after the United States. There are nearly 11,000 Puerto Ricans living in the U.S. Virgin Islands, most of whom live on the island of St. Croix, making 10 percent of the territory’s population.