

# Mrs. Jo Sandra Jones-James, A River of Blessings

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## Mrs. Jo Sandra Jones-James

People of African descent have a unique struggle that flows on the global stage, like a river that twists and turns yet nourishes and blesses humanity. To celebrate our contributions as African/Black people or African descendants, many societies create holidays or celebratory traditions. In the US context, Black History Month does this. In the US Virgin Islands, we too have Black History every day. Even more, every March Virgin Islanders celebrate Virgin Islands History Month and International Women's History Month.

This year I would like to highlight an impressive **International Woman and African Cultural**

**Bearer ---Mrs. Jo Sandra Jones-James.** Although she was born on the US Mainland, Mrs. James is known in the territory as an honorary Virgin Islander. In addition to her

many community awards and honors during the 37 years of teaching in the Virgin Islands, she was selected by the American Federation of Teachers to receive the National Outstanding Teacher award in 1997. She was also honored by the 25th Virgin Islands Legislature in 2003 for her outstanding contributions to music education in the Virgin Islands.

Mrs. James was raised by parents who were advocates for Marcus Garvey's ideology. If you recall Marcus Garvey's important message of healthy knowledge and respect of African heritage, you know that Mrs. James was nourished by a family that upheld these wholesome principles. Her parents encouraged her at an early age to study piano and to later pursue her music education in college. She earned her BA degree in music education in 1964 as a piano major from Rowan University in New Jersey and her MA degree in vocal and choral music in 1969 from Columbia University in NYC. As a post-graduate student, she was rewarded a grant by the NYC Urban Center in 1971 to study African music in the Institute of African Studies Department at the University of Ghana. Therefore, she had the opportunity to live in Ghana for a year while pursuing research on her topic, The Influence of the Christian Church and its Music on Traditional African Music in Ghana.

When she returned to the US in 1972, she began teaching at Essex County College in Newark, New Jersey. In addition to teaching the Concert Choir and individual voice students, she directed a Gospel Choir and initiated it as the first accredited Gospel Choir college course in New Jersey. She also wrote a course outline for another new class entitled, The Black Experience in Music History in which she taught the African music roots of slave songs, spirituals, blues, jazz and gospel music.

When she relocated to San Diego, California in 1978, she taught music theory as an Adjunct Professor at San Diego State University and a Gospel Choir class at San Diego City College. Additionally, she was employed by the California Council of the Arts as an Artist in Residence to teach African songs and dances to elementary school children in various San Diego public schools.

In 1982, when Mrs. James relocated to St. Thomas, she was assigned to teach at E. Benjamin Oliver Elementary School. That year she also taught part-time at the College of the Virgin Islands for one year until she opened her own music studio, Jones School of Music in Tillett Gardens. In 1983 she was reassigned to Ivanna Eudora Kean High School to teach vocal and choral music. There she taught piano, Concert Choir, Chorus and directed the renowned IEKHS Choraliers. Many of her former outstanding music students are currently music educators and professional musicians; such as, Howard Jones, Lorna Freeman, Wilbert Brooks, Akeel Breedy and Shikima Jones, just to name a few. In 1986, Mrs. James produced the territory's first high school LP record album called, Ivanna Eudora Kean High School Cultural Mix 1986. That historic record included several genre; such as, West Indian folk songs, calypso, reggae, classical, spirituals, rhythm and blues, contemporary gospel and the territory's anthem, The Virgin Islands March. The LP album featured an original song composed by Vernon Franklin, one of her choir members, in tribute to Dr. Lezmore Emanuel for his pioneering pedagogy in African History in the USVI.

When Mrs. James was appointed the Ivanna Eudora Kean Music Chairperson in 1987, she expanded the basically performance-oriented music curriculum by introducing a course outline for a Caribbean music history course, a voice lab, and a piano lab. Those classes gave an opportunity to more students to study music techniques, methods and the history of music. In 1990, she organized the Afro-Caribbean Folk Singers to expose the students to African and West Indian folk songs and dances. This outstanding group of singers and dancers made their debut at

the Transfer Day program that year and continued to perform for many school and civic events. One of their favorite songs that she taught them to sing in zulu was the African National Anthem, **Nkosi Sikeleli** Africa. Additionally, the IEKHS Choraliers was the first choir in the territory to sing the African National Anthem in 1990 on a special program organized to celebrate Nelson Mandela's release from prison at Mandela Circle. Her choir was also the first singing group in the Virgin Islands to wear African kente cloth shawls that she had imported from Kumasi, Ghana. She continued to teach her students to have pride in their African heritage in the 1993 when she organized and conducted a 200-voice mass choir wearing all African attire on the occasion of the IEKHS Choraliers 10th Alumni Anniversary concert held in the Grand ballroom of Frenchman's Reef Hotel. When she retired from the VI Department of Education in 2003 she continued to teach piano classes as a Part-time Instructor at the University of the Virgin Islands for 17 years.

In addition to her directing school choirs during the 37 years teaching in St. Thomas, Mrs. James has served as a former Minister of Music for her church, St. Thomas Assembly of God; a former Choir Director and Music Consultant for the New Herrnhut Moravian Church Senior Choir; a former Minister of Music for the Lutheran Church of Reformation and a former Choir Director of the Caribbean Chorale.

As an outstanding professional, Mrs. James is an embodiment of the Pan African personality. Her Afro-centric teaching is a reflection of her parents' influence on the importance of education with an emphasis on our rich African culture. She is the beloved spouse of Mr. Samuel Josiah James, a retired WTJX broadcast engineer and freelance photographer. She is the loving stepmother of three adult children; Arlene, Theo and Jo Anne; the proud grandmother of Jadere, Kassie, Resa and Ethan and the great-grandmother of Hunter, Elijah and Reign. Additionally, she is a surrogate mother to hundreds of her former students who have been impacted by her love and music expertise during the 37 years of teaching in the Virgin Islands.

Do you hear the songs that we sing? Can you see the joy in our hearts? The soul of Virgin Islands people has been enriched and our quest for self-determination and cultural development strengthened by the innovative musical contributions of Mrs. Jo Sandra Jones-James. For Virgin Islands History Month and International Women's Month 2023, we honor her as a river of blessings.

**Submitted by:** Malik Sekou. PhD, Political Science & History, College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences, University of the Virgin Islands.