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Virgin Islands Mourns Loss of First Female Judge Eileen R. Petersen, a Legal Pioneer

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As the community mourns the passing of Judge Eileen R. Petersen, who died on Tuesday at age 86, accolades have begun to pour in from the territory's leadership.

The first woman to be appointed to the bench in the territory, Judge Petersen began her professional career as a teacher, before pursuing her legal studies as one of only three women in her class. After graduation, Judge Petersen began her service to the Virgin Islands in the legal field. She worked as an Assistant Attorney General before being appointed as a judge. Following her judicial career, Ms. Petersen continued her trailblazing path, being appointed first Chair of the VI Casino Control Commission.

Over her many years of service, Ms. Petersen “mentored many women through her participation in organizations to include the Virgin Islands Bar, National Bar Association, Business and Professional Women, and the Mu Gamma Omega Chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc,” according to a statement released by her family.

Senator Donna Frett-Gregory, herself a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha, said that Judge Petersen epitomized the AKA motto “Supreme in Service to All Mankind”.

“She gave unselfishly to the development of young people in our Virgin Islands community, and we are all better for her contributions,” Frett-Gregory said about her soror. “She paved a path so that other women such as myself could follow.”

Senate President Novelle Francis called himself “fortunate” to have known Judge Petersen personally “throughout my life, from when I first met her as a teenager delivering newspapers to the Toro Building in Christiansted to our multiple interactions during my years in the Virgin Islands Police Department and since.”

Senator Francis was the sponsor of the legislation to name the building that houses the Casino Control Commission in her honor. “This building will stand as a testament of her exceptional record of public service and leadership,” said the senator.

Governor Bryan, in his statement called Judge Peterson “more than a pioneer, who shattered glass ceilings.” Indeed, she was a “giant in the field of jurisprudence who paved the way for Virgin Islands Women to serve on the bench and in the highest levels of leadership within our judiciary.”

In 2004, Judge Petersen shared with her [interviewer](#), a 5th grade student of the Charles H. Emmanuel School on St. Croix, her experience as a trailblazer. As the first woman on the bench in the territory, she said that people did not know how to treat her. “They looked at me as though I were some strange person that flew down the sky,” she said. “I would walk down the street and people would be pointing their finger at me...because I was an oddity, and of course that made me feel very uncomfortable.” She spoke about not having a robe ordered for her swearing-in, the lack of the traditional reception that welcomes new judges to the bench, and the lack of invited guests from the legal fraternity. That’s when she realized, she told her young interviewer, that “I would have a difficult time unless I proved myself”.

Judging by the words that have been spoken about her life and sterling career upon her passing, prove herself Judge Petersen certainly did. According to her family, “From her we learned many invaluable life lessons: to not be afraid to be the first, to stand by your values, to be fair and compassionate, and to have a sense of humor.”