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TenaVel Thomas Navigates from Virgin Islands to Director of One of the Busiest Ports, Both Sea and Air, in United States

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On Thursday, June 29, the Port of NY/Newark hosted a Change of Command Ceremony, honoring customs and traditions, and officially presenting TenaVel T. Thomas as Port Director.

A young Virgin Islander with Antiguan heritage has this week been officially appointed to lead the U.S. Customs and Border Protection agency's oversight of the Port of New York/Newark, a CBP station that includes the busiest seaport on the eastern seaboard, as well as the fourth busiest airport in the United States.

TenaVel Thomas was born on St. Thomas to parents who had immigrated to the territory from their home country of Antigua & Barbuda. “They came looking for the American Dream,” Ms. Thomas told Consortium journalists, “and really built a life for themselves and their kids.”

With an associate degree in computer information systems, a bachelor of science in communications arts, and a master of professional studies in criminal justice leadership under her belt, Ms. Thomas joined the agency as a CBP officer in July of 2008. Immediately, she noticed that she was one of a very small cohort of women. “It is a male-dominated organization and a male dominated environment,” she said, noting that only about 20 percent of CBP employees are women. Ms. Thomas was undaunted, and in her 15-year career rose through the ranks of the agency – from supervisory officer to program manager, to chief CBP officer to watch commander, then to acting assistant director of field operations and assistant port director of passenger operations at the John F. Kennedy International Airport.

Her official appointment to the role of Port Director for New York/Newark in the CBP Office of Field Operations comes after just under three years in the role. She oversees more than 1,000 CBP employees who are charged with maintaining border security at her jurisdiction’s busy International Mail Facility, five airports, six cargo ports, and three passenger cruise terminals. “It is a massive operation,” she disclosed .

Raised in a household suffused with a Caribbean work ethic, buttressed by an older sister who is herself a high-achiever, Ms. Thomas says her home environment “certainly drove my mindset,” crediting her remarkable career trajectory to the values instilled in her by her family. “My parents, they didn’t settle for less. My sister, she didn’t settle for less. They believed very much in hard work, so I came from a background and environment of structure, and an environment that everyone had to work for what it is that they wanted,” she noted.

The egalitarian household also ensured that she did not grow up believing that she was precluded from any particular line of work because of her gender. “Both my parents cooked — my dad is a very good cook!” Ms. Thomas boasted. “So it wasn’t like my mom was the only one that was expected to do it. They ran a business together, everyone contributed equally. That was always something I took with me,” she mused.

However, Ms. Thomas says she remained keenly aware of the part gender bias can play in women’s professional lives. “I’m not ignorant to the fact that women are under-represented in our agency.” Her awareness in that regard has driven her to ensure that she spends much of her time on activities that “lift women up, empower women, really have them step into their voices.” Indeed, her conversation with the Consortium on Friday was conducted during a break in a training session she was participating in, designed to do just that. “Today, we have women from multiple different agencies, multiple backgrounds,” she said excitedly, noting that she and her team coordinated and hosted this inter-agency training exercise for women. “It’s just absolutely phenomenal,” Ms. Thomas declared.

That drive to design and create programs that address needs and challenges in the agency and beyond is not new for Ms. Thomas. She has also been responsible for the creation of a therapy dog program and establishment of a full-time resiliency team that focuses on workforce care and providing resources to support CBP employees and their families. Ms. Thomas also created a new repatriation center to serve refugees that arrived in the United States through the JFK airport. While she was assistant port director of passenger operations at JFK, she and her team were credited for the successful implementation of the Simplified Arrival System at the airport.

"Ms. Thomas's career has been filled with unsurpassed service and reward," read a short biographical profile included in the leaflet that accompanied her appointment ceremony on June 28. Again, she credited her stellar professional career to the grounding that she received at home. "You're a leader, regardless of what it is that you're doing, you lead from where you're at," is how she remembers her father's attitude towards her growing up. She recalls feeling somewhat uncomfortable during her early career when people would predict, "You're going to be a port director one day," as she says she was more interested in hard work and doing her best, rather than any accolades or high esteem. However, she credits that focus on getting the job done, and her appetite for accepting challenges as the engine of her professional success, and the reason she is now in a position to inspire and encourage other women towards similar levels of achievement. "Having that drive, that mindset, has allowed me to now be in one of the highest positions where I could continue to affect that," Ms. Thomas said. "It's a blessing for sure."

Apart from her parents and older sister, Ms. Thomas credits a host of positive role models for her success. Among them, she named Gloria Lambert, someone who she met during her time in the [Customs Explorer Program](#). Ms. Lambert was a huge motivating presence, and pushed Ms. Thomas towards believing that she could have a career in CBP. Also named was Janet Martin, one of Ms. Thomas's JROTC sergeants at the Charlotte Amalie High School. "I certainly want to recognize these two women as women outside of my household that really motivated me," Ms. Thomas said.

Reflecting on her sterling career thus far, and her professional journey from young St. Thomian to head of one of CBP's busiest jurisdictions, Ms. Thomas says she remains firmly rooted in her heritage. "I wear my VI pride valiantly," she declared. "I let people know that I am a Caribbean woman, I'm very proud to be a Caribbean woman. I think the groundwork for my success was laid through my elevation in the Virgin Islands, and that's not lost on me."

TenaVel Thomas's obvious love for the Virgin Islands has been reflected right back to her, she noted with gratitude. When news of her appointment began to circulate, the outpouring of support from people back home was overwhelming. "I've had a lot of people from the VI that have reached out to me...that's humbling and lets me know that I'm doing something right."