

## Mario Picayo

Tel. 845-559-4757

email: gycultura@gmail.com

Testimony presented during the committee hearing on Culture, Historic Preservation, Youth and Recreation, May 5, 2016 at 2 p.m. Frits B. Lawaetz Legislative Hall, St. Croix.

Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee,

Good afternoon, and thank you for this invitation.

My name is Mario Picayo. I am a consultant and member of the delegation of artists and scholars that hope to represent the Virgin Islands of the United States at the next edition of the Festival del Caribe, or Caribbean Festival, in Santiago de Cuba this coming July. I am here to provide testimony that will give you an overview of the festival and the reasons why our participation is important, particularly this year.

I want to put myself in context for those of you who do not already know me. I was born in Cuba, but the Virgin Islands have been my home since I was 17 years old when I moved to St. Thomas with my father and brothers. I worked with the research team for the Smithsonian Institution's Folk Life Festival dedicated to the Virgin Islands in 1990, and my work as photographer of Caribbean nature, and particularly of celebrations like carnival, has received wide international exposure.

Last year my photographic work took me to the Caribbean Festival, not as I always envisioned, representing the Territory, but through an invitation from the Ministry of Sports, Youth and Culture of The Bahamas, the country to which the 2015 Festival was dedicated. My photo exhibit "Junkanoo" was a colorful display of The Bahamas most important cultural manifestation.

During that visit to the Festival I was able to experience the magnitude of the event, its importance as a cultural celebration of our Caribbean heritage and traditions, and the great promotion that the Festival is for all countries that participate.

The Festival del Caribe has been celebrated for thirty-five years. Thousands of participants and spectators representing twenty-five or more nations gather for seven days to speak, to learn from each other, to get to know each other better, and to display the beauty and importance of their culture, whether it is in the festival arts, visual and fine arts, literature, religion, crafts, cooking, storytelling, film, or theater.

The Festival serves as a showcase for people from all participating nations and as a great spectacle for the thousands of tourists that come every year from as far as Spain, Holland, and even Australia. Canadians are a common sight and more Americans than ever are expected this year.

The Festival is unique in several ways. All Caribbean nations are welcomed to participate, but one is selected every year to be the country of honor, to which the event is dedicated. This country is responsible to put on the largest show, which also means the largest delegation. Last year The Bahamas were honored, 2012 was Martinique, 2011 Trinidad and Tobago, and so on. All other participating countries receive their own space in the schedule and can bring as many participants as they can afford.

The Festival del Caribe is not held at one venue. Two central places, the Heredia Theater and the Casa del Caribe (Caribbean House) serve as headquarters for the main events, but the complete city of Santiago de Cuba joins in with its museums, theaters, movie houses, bookstores, clubs, and the streets themselves, hosting what seems to be a never ending cultural program. The squares of the city become dance and concert halls with activities beginning in the morning, continuing until 2 or 3 a.m.

Two parades wind through the city with costumed characters, dancers, and musicians from all over the Caribbean and beyond (Brazil for example), jumping and shining. One parade opens the festival, the other one closes it.

There are also activities outside of the city of Santiago, like religious ceremonies, and one yearly event in honor of the cimarrones, or maroons, and to their courageous resistance against all forms of bondage and oppression.

It is difficult to describe this multi-disciplinary event, but never in my life had I witnessed a larger gathering of Caribbean cultural bearers, nor had I seen a more impressive display of just about every aspect of Caribbean culture in one place at one time.

Imagine our three carnivals, the Agricultural Fair, Christmas, and the Folklife Festival rolled into one, multiplied by twenty and packed into seven days. That should give you an idea.

I feel that our participation will give the Virgin Islands an important cultural showcase and the opportunity to promote our brand inside a country that will be a major player in the tourist arena in the upcoming years. It will also allow us to see how they organize the festival, what they do right, what they do wrong, and perhaps the learning experience can help us implement ideas into our own festivals, or, who knows – maybe into the creation of a new one!

Of all the nations and territories in the Caribbean ours is the one that has never participated. The festival, as I said before, was dedicated to The Bahamas last year. Puerto Rico received that honor in 1989. Our goal is that our 2016 delegation persuades the Festival's organizers to dedicate the event to the Virgin Islands of the United States in 2018.

In this year of changing US-Cuba relations it is imperative that we join not only our Caribbean brothers and sisters at the Festival del Caribe, but that we make sure to take advantage of our very unique position as Caribbean people and citizens of the United States, and be at the forefront of any initiative that encourages trade and cooperation, including cultural and educational exchanges, which can ultimately improve the quality of life of all Virgin Islanders.

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We need to embrace this new spirit of reconciliation between Cuba and the United States of which we are a part, and make sure that as history is made, the Virgin Islands of the United States are not mere spectators. The Festival del Caribe is a perfect greeting card from our culture and our people to the Cuban people, to the rest of the Caribbean, and to all visitors from around the world.

Thank you for your time.