

VIRGIN ISLANDS-PUERTO RICO FRIENDSHIP: 60 YEARS LATER

Warmest greetings to the Honorable Members of the Virgin Islands Legislature, distinguished guests, and to the listening and viewing audience.

The year 2024 marks the 60th anniversary of the local legislature's approval of the Bill that was approved on February 20, 1964 by Governor Paiewonsky. This law, as we all know, changed the name of the traditional Discovery Day to *Virgin Islands-Puerto Rico Friendship Day*. It was a highly deserved recognition of the longstanding ties of friendship and brotherhood uniting our two communities, as well as an acknowledgment of the significant contributions Puerto Ricans have made to these islands.

Each year, the Governor authorizes the creation of a committee to organize events that promote knowledge and pride in the culture, history, life, and contributions of Puerto Ricans. Initially, this was celebrated with an annual luncheon at the "Vieques en Santa Cruz Restaurant" in Calquhoun. However, with the arrival of Governor Juan Francisco Luis, and under the guidance of our former First Lady, Mrs. Luz María Guadalupe Luis, the luncheon was moved to Government House, the House of the People - a perfect venue for such an important event. She transformed the luncheon into an Awards Gala Reception.

Over the past 60 years, the gala has evolved into a weekend of activities and events that showcase the splendor of Puerto Rican culture, bringing together entire families and communities. Festivities have included parades, sports exchanges, queen shows, performances by local and renowned Puerto Rican bands, school presentations, the friendship village, and much more, all becoming landmarks of the celebration.

Later additions included theatrical presentations by Puerto Rican and local talents at the Island Center for the Performing Arts, movie classics, and a documentary premiere by a local filmmaker, along with kite workshops, festivals, gospel nights, food fairs, student poster contests. The event also added arroz con pollo contests, "Fiesta en el Batey" or Family Fun Days, and so much more that it cannot all be captured here.

The recognition awards given to individuals at Government House evolved to include awards for groups - pioneer families, communities such as Profit and Grove Place, outstanding students, persons with disabilities, nonprofit organizations, and mixed longstanding marriages. This year past presidents are being recognized for being pivotal in reaching this important landmark.

A longtime dream for many was realized in 2008 with the opening of a Hispanic Collection area in the Florence Williams Library, following years of effort. Today, this dream continues to thrive as the committee works to enhance it for the benefit of children and adults alike.

For almost 20 years, until it ceased operation, this committee collaborated with the local AVIS newspaper to produce a "Hispanic Heritage Month Supplement," which highlighted not only Hispanic contributions but, most importantly, Puerto Rican history and its influence on the Virgin Islands.

The committee has also worked with the Virgin Islands Lottery, ensuring that their October tickets honor Puerto Rican achievers.

In the St. Thomas-St. John district, under the excellent leadership of Mrs. Carmen Lydia Marrero-Dennis, VIPR celebrations have become a hallmark of the cultural calendar. Events include cultural exchanges, debates, forums, symposiums, workshops, art exhibits, music and dance clinics, and food fairs—all with a focus on education, history, and culture.

Sixty years ago, this may have seemed like a dream, but thanks to the hard work of past and present presidents and their active and enthusiastic committees, VIPR weekend is now an international event that attracts tourists from around the world.

Our Vision for the Future

What began as a modest celebration 60 years ago has grown exponentially, but the work is far from finished. Our islands are home to many Hispanics, and Puerto Ricans continue to represent a powerful force in shaping the Virgin Islands. Whether in education, professions, politics, sports, religion, or business, Puerto Ricans have made—and continue to make—an indelible mark on every aspect of island life. Their contributions, both past and present, should be celebrated not just during this commemorative weekend but throughout the year.

We envision a future where the Virgin Islands-Puerto Rico Friendship is further embedded into our identity. One way to achieve this is by dedicating sections in our visitors' centers that highlight the unique bond between our two communities. These areas can tell the story of our shared history, culture, and contributions, so that every tourist and resident alike can understand the profound connection between these islands and Puerto Rico. This will not only promote understanding but also deepen the sense of pride among our people.

Additionally, it's vital that the history of Latinos in the Virgin Islands, particularly the contributions of Puerto Ricans, becomes a more prominent part of our education system and promotional materials. Latinos in the Virgin Islands should have greater representation in history books, brochures, and other forms of cultural promotion. This representation will ensure that future generations, both locally and abroad, are aware of the integral role Puerto Ricans and other Latinos have played in shaping the rich, diverse cultural landscape of the Virgin Islands.

We must continue to cultivate the bonds of friendship, unity, and brotherhood between our communities, ensuring that Puerto Ricans and all Hispanics remain an integral and celebrated part of island life. By doing so, we will further enhance the cultural tapestry of these islands, ensuring they remain, as always, an *American Paradise*.