

TESTIMONY

Donna M. Christensen, MD

**Committee on Government Operations, Veterans Affairs
and Consumer Protection
Chair, The Honorable Carla J. Joseph**

February 28, 2023

Good Morning. Chairwoman Carla Joseph, Members of the Committee, other Members present, Legislative staff, fellow testifiers, guests and viewing and listening audience.

Thank you for the invitation to speak on Bill number 35-0006 that honors the contribution of my good friend, former Senator George E. Goodwin, affixes his name to the cricket field where I joined him on many occasions and bestows on this long time and revered public servant, the Virgin Islands Medal of Honor.

At the outset let me say Thank you for introducing this long overdue recognition.

I don't remember when I first met George but it had to be in the early 1980's when I first became a part of the Democratic Territorial Committee and active in Democratic Party politics. A close friend and mentee of the late Early B Ottley, you could not be around George and not be drawn into the politics of the day. We have been fast friends since then, and Madam Chairwoman, you were a part of his inner circle.

I'm sure others will speak of his term as a Senator, and his time as the GERS Administrator, Chief of Staff to Lt. governor Luz James and advisor to Governor Turnbull. He was briefly a member of my Congressional staff as well. As a indomitable organizer and campaigner, he along with Mrs. Yvonne Bowsky managed the 1986 campaign that successfully elected Alexander Farrelly governor, and Derek Hodge, Lieutenant Governor.

I would be remiss, though, if I didn't at least mention that as GERS Administrator he played a key role in the process leading up to the purchase of the West India Company by the Virgin Islands Government during the Farrelly- Hodge administration.

And before I speak to where most of our work together was focused, I remember him as one of those who cemented the relationship of our Legislators with the National Black Caucus of State Legislators, and having them hold one of their meetings in St. Thomas where I was first introduced to the organization.

There was perhaps no greater advocate for the alleviation of the plight of immigrants who were under the bonded system here in the Virgin Islands. George was determined and untiring in working with then Delegate Ron DeLugo to secure the passage of the Virgin Islands Non-Immigrant Alien Adjustment Act of 1981.

Testifying as President of the Caribbean Development Coalition at the House Committee on the Judiciary's Subcommittee on Immigration, Refugees and International Law in 1981, after explaining the then situation and what the law would do, he spoke with force and passion when he said:

“Passage of this Bill will assist greatly in eradicating the social stigma, it will remove the shackles of bondage that presently afflicts us, it will remove line that divides the people of the Virgin Islands and it will provide a humane solution that will bring an end to the plight and discriminatory acts on our people.”

With passage of the Bill by the House and Senate, it became Public Law No. 97-271 and ended that dark period in our history.

His work did not end there, he assisted thousands with the required paperwork and continued his relentless efforts to open doors and to foster full integration into the community.

As a culmination of those efforts he dedicated much of the rest of his active political life to an effort we hope will finally come to fruition - extending visa waiver status to citizens of the Caribbean. It made every sense in the world. Why should our Caribbean sisters and brothers go to the customary Puerto Rico for medical care and to shop where few had family and most didn't speak the language.

And so we started to chart the course. First In my local Congressional office, then in Washington. We met and argued the case with the Departments of Immigration and State as well as with Members of House and Senate. There we met strong opposition over a couple of countries that had high visa denial rates. But George never gave up and he successfully secured the support of the NBCSL with their adoption of Resolution 00-72 in 1999 supporting the visas.

Haven been instilled with George's dedication to this issue I remained vigilant and in the 112th Congress introduced the Virgin Islands Visa Waiver Act, HR. 5875 and H.R. 1966 in the subsequent 113th - my last term in Congress.

But beyond that because that visa waiver program had been entrenched in my political DNA, when President Obama spoke about loosening VISA restriction and the US Senate began to explore it, I rushed to attend every one of their meetings to pursue our inclusion in any outcome. Nothing came of it, but I am glad that Congresswoman Plaskett has taken it up in H.R. 5460 and got it through the Judiciary Committee last year. She has reintroduced the measure as HB. 1033 in the current Congress.

As you can imagine, this Bill likely faces strong winds against it in this Congress, but it is my hope that by rallying all of our forces we can further honor Senator George E. Goodwin, by having the Virgin Islands visa waiver program become a reality.

So I thank you again for Bill number 35-0006 and for the opportunity to not only testify in support of it, but more importantly for the opportunity to revisit my journey with George. I must admit I have to thank James O'Bryan Jr. and Brian Modeste for helping to stimulate some of those memories.

George's contributions are enumerable and far reaching. History will tell the full story of all he has given to us, but we begin today!

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Donna M. Christensen".

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