

TESTIMONY OF DONNA M. CHRISTENSEN, MD

AT THE COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS, VETERANS AFFAIRS AND CONSUMER PROTECTION OF THE THIRTY-FIFTH LEGISLATURE

July 12, 2023

Good afternoon chairwoman Carla J. Joseph, Members of the Committee on Government Operations, Veterans Affairs, and Consumer Protections, other members of the 35th Legislature, Legislative staff, in Chamber and listening audience:

Thank you for the invitation to speak on behalf and in support of Bill No. 35-0101, a Resolution commending and honoring Dr. Olaf "Bronco" Hendricks for his tireless years of remarkable and invaluable contributions to the people of the Virgin Islands in the field of psychiatry, his advocacy for social justice for individuals with behavioral health and substance abuse issues and for his music. It is my pleasure and honor to speak on his behalf.

Before I start I want to caution that since some of my recollections go a little while back, while I think they are largely accurate, one or two could be a little off.

I am not sure when I first knew Olaf, who we always called and still affectionately call Bronco, but I do remember that he was my classmate from Kindergarten. And he was always teasing me and everyone else from back then. I sort of remember his having something to say - making naar - when I sprained my ankle and the nuns had to lift and carry me out to recess.

But the recollection that stands out most is of our kindergarten play - I think it was for our graduation. Renie could not confirm but I'm pretty sure it was him on the stage with me and I was supposed to be giving him a bowl of fungi. In our first rehearsal I dropped the bowl. After all of the laughter which I'm sure he started, the nuns decided to keep it in the script.

For all of the teasing I was subjected to, when we were in 7th grade I remember plotting to get back at him. We girls often did embroidery on Friday afternoons. I don't know what the boys did then, but I recall he used to sit behind me. So before he came in I put a needle in his seat! No damage was done, and it did not end any of the harassing!

In 8th grade, the last class I was in with them, I recall him, Rafa Llanos and Malcolm Plaskett sitting near me. That was towards the back so there was always some prank played on the girls nearby.

One day when I came into class there was an about an inch square foil package on my desk and all of them started cracking up. I don't think I need to explain! None of us who sat near that gang were spared from their jokes.

As preteens and teenagers a group of us that included Olaf used to hang out on the wharf. One day we decided to take a walk. I don't remember where we started but I recall coming around contentment and then turning the corner towards town which meant we would pass where I lived in Orange Grove. We decided to stop there get something to drink. My Parents were not there but I didn't think that was going to be a problem. We were all comfortably sitting on the porch right off the street when my father came home early. All we heard was his shouting DONNA MARIE and everyone scattered and ran! I tell this story because all of the people who were there swore that Olaf was first to get back to the wharf!

The Wharf for those who don't know is the grounds of the National Park in Christiansted. Back then we had a playground and basketball court where we used to watch People like Mario Morehead and Derek Hodge play.

I left after 8th grade to join some friends in a school in Puerto Rico and later continued school in NY where I graduated. I am grateful that they - Bronco, Renie, Roy, Lucy, Candido, Bodil, Mario and the others - still kept me as a member of the class of '62. And I love joining in the church services, anniversaries, graduations, picnics and get togethers. I will let Bodil tell the rest of this part of the story from here.

Both Olaf and I entered Medical School in 1966 - he at Howard and me at George Washington. Although we studied hard, that was a fun time as Virgin Islanders in the Washington would get together on weekends.

I would often study in the Howard Library, but one day we decided I would join Olaf in one of his his classes at Howard. As it turned out the day I joined him I got to hear a lecture by the renowned Dr. H. Montague Cobb. His lecture that day was on the nervous system and, would you believe it was the Griffith- Paret fight that he used to demonstrate the several neurological steps of Paret's decline to brain death.

So that was a little about our early relationship, which continues to this day!

So let me get what might be the elephant in the room out early:

Yes we ran against each other in the 1996 primary. I will have to admit that initially, in debt after the 1994 primary I did briefly consider not running again in 1996. But as I thought about it, I realized that if I ever was going to run again, it had to be then. Not having consulted with each other, both of us jumped in. I think it was harder on classmates and close mutual friends than anyone else. It was a close race, but when it was over we moved on as classmates and as friends.

As someone who has known Bronco all this time, it is a great honor for me to be here to pay tribute to this man who for all of the years of his adult and professional life has carried all of our burdens, anxieties, depressions, psychoses, and the contradictions and conflicts of our community on his back and his own psyche! That has not by any means been an easy burden, or one that any one of us could have carried with the skill, aplomb, empathy and selflessness that he did.

Olaf was at the same time, and for a long time, the Chief territorial psychiatrist at the Department of Health and the Hospital, the prison psychiatrist, the forensic psychiatrist at the Courts, a private practitioner of psychiatry and the one who all of us turned to for consultation for our own patients.

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I would especially reach out for help when obeh was a part of the issues I was dealing with. Even with all of that, he for a few years added Assistant Commissioner of Health in the Farrelly Hodge Administration to all of the others.

As a community, we had and still have lots of issues that need healing - so we should not just be honoring him, we need to name him as a saint for carrying all of this on his broad shoulders. Through it all he remained the active classmate, friend and community mover and shaker - all the while not shirking any of his being the doting father, loving husband, supportive brother and involved family man.

His outlet has to have been dealing with horses and horse racing and also delving into music and culture. When you watch and listen to him play, he undoubtedly poured and released all of the stress we caused into that Saxophone.

Olaf has played a major role in keeping our culture alive and vibrant and instilling the knowledge and love of it in our people - young and old. This too, I consider a part of his practice of the healing art.

Olaf Hendricks, through his practice of psychiatry, his serving different health administrative positions, his music, his contributions to cultural preservation; through his sharing of his thoughts and insights on radio and at events where he was a much sought after speaker, has truly gone above and beyond to bring healing not only to individuals but to our entire Virgin Islands Community.

The legacy of this gentleman, who I can truly call a Renaissance man, is not just set, it continues to morph so to respond to us as our needs change or grow. For that and all you will hear about him today and going forward, we owe Bronco a profound debt of gratitude. And I thank you, Chairwoman Joseph, the Committee and co-sponsor, Senator Franklin Johnson for inviting me to testify on his behalf and in doing so to give my strong and unwavering support for the honor you will undoubtedly unanimously bestow on my classmate and friend.

Respectfully Submitted:

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