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Family & Student Services, and Inclusivity

Professional Learning*DEI*Mental Health*MTSS*PBIS/SEL*Restorative Practices

Testimony of Dr. Robert C. Chalwell Jr. to the 35th Legislature's Committee on Government Operations, Veterans Affairs, and Consumer Protection regarding Bill No. 35- 0033. Wednesday, May 31, 2023 in the Earle B. Ottley Legislative Hall in St. Thomas USVI.

Honorable Carla J. Joseph, Chairperson of the Committee on Government Operations, Veterans Affairs, and Consumer Protection, proposing Senators Honorable Fonseca and Blyden, to all of the Honorable Members, and members of the community gathered here today, good afternoon. My name is Dr. Robert C. Chalwell Jr. Thank you for this opportunity to share a bit with you about the first superman in my life. Benburin Stephens, known to some as Mr. Stephens or Mr. Benny, and to some people he was respectfully known as Sis. Stephens' husband. But to me he was and will always be "grandfather."

Grandfather was born in Fat Hogs Bay Tortola, on October 28, 1924 as one of a pair of fraternal twins to Nathaniel Stephens and Teresa Stout. Through his parents, he, his twin brother Ashburn "Ashy," and siblings were connected to the Thomas, Skelton, Stout, Maduro, Brewley, Gordon, Penn, Frett, Fahie, Lettsome, Venzen, Pickering, Turnbull, Potter, Rabsatt, Davies, Smith, George, Harrigan, and Jennings families, and many others. Believe me, I could go on. I share this long list of familial connections, because that is how grandfather taught it to me. He would not mince words, he would not equivocate, and he wouldn't pick and choose. Whether verbally recounting connections to me as we sat and talked, or pointing out specific family member houses as we walked the streets of St. Thomas, St. John, or East End Tortola together, he would emphatically say, "these are your relatives." One particularly pointed statement went as follows, "you see deh Maduros Baugher's Bay? Every single one of them is yo family."

I would never miss an opportunity to join him as he visited family including Dr. Ruth E. Thomas, Uncle Ashy, Aunt Lee, Jennie Wheatley, Maxwell Thomas, Mariel "Penny" Giles, Lilian Stephens, Isaac Stout, and Vanella Chalwell. Through these cousins, aunts, and uncles, I learned the details of these relations, and now I pass that knowledge on to others. Upon his untimely passing in 2010, it was from these beloved elders I learned that as a young man, following the termination of formal education at 5th Standard, my grandfather traveled between St. Thomas and Tortola for work. He worked, first, at the West Indian Dock on the coal and cargo boats. From 1941-1945 he worked at the Marine Barracks, and from 1946-1950, he was employed at Public Works as a mason. Grandfather returned to the BVI to claim his bride. In 1962, he settled his young wife and his three oldest children in a modest home in Savan. His older brother, Bishop Moses Stephens, served as a pastor, and the Overseer for the US & UK Church of God of Prophecy congregations. He had established himself as an esteemed member of the St. Thomas community, a business owner in Savan, and someone to turn to for guidance and in times of need. By the time I came into the picture in 1975, grandfather, granny, and their seven (7) children called Estate Nadir home.

Beyond commitment to family, or because of his commitment to our family, grandfather also taught me about conservation. In the time before municipal water supply, grandfather modeled that you never let a drop of rainwater go to waste. During the rainy season, we collected water in 5-gallon bottles, gallon bottles, or anything that could hold water. And if our cistern was overflowing, that meant the neighbors were invited to fill their bottles too.



He taught me to trust my own hands and use them to nurture, build, and repair. Grandfather had every tool, every kind of shovel, trowel, hammer, plier, grip, level, nail, and screw you could ever need. All you would have to do is keep looking until you found it.

Grandfather modeled the multicultural, intercultural, and community engagement skills I use professionally today. As a native English speaker, he learned Spanish, spoke it with his Tomas, Garcia, and Soriano cousins who came home from the Dominican Republic. He spoke it with his Spanish speaking neighbors. And he spoke it at home, helping his children and grandchildren to feel connected to different languages and cultures.

He also taught me humility. I remember as a teenager, advocating for one of my cousins from San Pedro de Macoris, who I felt particularly close to... because in the summer of 1989, that cousin spoke to his boss and got me a job at the Texaco gas station that used to be across from French Town on Veterans Drive. That job afforded me to meet the late Mrs. Margaret Creque, who counted that gas station as one of many holdings. She would come and sit and talk with me and the other workers at the gas station, so comfortably, you'd never know that she was the boss', boss', boss. My cousin was trying to get belonger status in the BVI straightened out for him, his pregnant wife, and his parents. When I asked my grandfather to help them, he humbly said, "Junito, my Spanish is not good enough to handle legal matters." His humble admission inspired me to grow my fluency in Spanish, so that today, I can not only connect with my Spanish-speaking family, but also, as an education professional I engage with families who speak little to no English, and help them to feel seen and included in the school community, and in the education of their children.

Finally, but by no means exhaustively, my grandfather Mr. Benburin Stephens, husband of Valaria Penn Stephens, and father of Ashley, Bernard, Carolyn, Myron, Coleen, Beverly, and my mother Lorraine Stephens, taught me what it means to be a hero. You will hear others talk in more detail about his heroism. But, I was there the night he lifted my godmother Soli, and my godbrothers out of their burning home, through a bank of louvered windows he had to dislodge and remove using only his bare hands. I was too young to help him, and was kept from getting too close. But I saw the flames, and smelled the ash and burnt wood for weeks afterwards, with the knowledge that my grandfather, with no consideration for his own safety, had risked his life to save the lives of others.

My grandfather's quiet life of commitment to his family, and service to the US and British Virgin Islands communities, has been a beacon for me, my siblings Earl Hodge, Dr. Reba Hodge, and Amber-Nicole Stephens, and all of my cousins. The light of his example has guided each of us throughout our lives. And has afforded each of us, in our own ways, to be a light for others in the communities that we belong to.

Thank you to my aunt Beverly Stephens Samuels who has worked for almost a decade and a half to make this day a reality. On behalf of my mother Lorraine Stephens, my grandmother Valaria Stephens, and the entire family, I again thank the Hon. Chairperson, and Senators Fonseca and Blyden, for this Bill honoring the life of a regular man who was a literal lifesaver, and hero to me and so many others. In voting to approve the naming of this stretch of road, from Bertha Boschulte School to Nadir after Benburin "Benny" Stephens, you allow him to be a beacon of light for generations of Virgin Islanders and visitors, for decades to come.

Thank you, and may God Bless you all!