

Good Afternoon, Honorable Carla J. Joseph Chairperson of the Committee on Government Operations, Veterans Affairs, and Consumer Protection,

My name is Monife Stout and I am here representing the Thomas-Skelton-Stout Families.

The strength of a community or family is found in the commitment of individual members to forge strong intergenerational bonds. Benburin "Benny" Stephens epitomized that commitment in the Thomas, Skelton, Stout families. His seven children Bernard, Ashley, Lorraine, Myron, Carolyn, Coleen, and Beverly, and older grandchildren learned that going anywhere with "daddy/grandfather" meant greeting many people, most of whom were introduced as family or "kissing-up" cousins, as was commonly known.

This commitment also meant regular visits with cousin Ruth E. Thomas at her home which overlooked UVI and the airport. She was an educator and matriarch of the Thomas, Skelton, Stout families. 'Benny's' way of strengthening connections from one generation to the next included spending time with extended family spanning the areas of Thomasville, Estate Thomas, Pearson Gardens, Savan, St. John, and regular time on the waterfront playing dominoes. He was driven by a purpose to facilitate the uniting of family members and maintaining family ties.

For over three decades the Thomas, Skelton, Stout Family Reunion (TSS) has served as a vehicle for reminding the people of the Virgin Islands the depth of connection between one another. The TSS Families have established an annual student scholarship program, hosted annual reunions and fellowship, and have maintained vast genealogies that link families, including branches of Lettsomes, Penn, Rabsatts, Gordon, Smith, Frett, Fahies, Maduro, Brewley, Stridiron, Gumbs, Stephens, Crabbe, Malone, Garcia, Pickering, Soriano, Flax, Turnbull, Plunkett, Krigger, Benjamin, Hendricks, Smalls, Joseph, Dennis, and Petrus. Of these names, and beyond, cousin Ruth's legacy is sustained today through the leadership of Louise Thomas Lettsome, Edwin Lettsome, Beverly Stephens Samuel, Monife Stout, Leticia Penn-Rogers, Annette Bertrand and many others. As a contributor to this legacy, uncle Benny, cousin Benny, 'Steve-o', Mr. Benny or Mr. Stephens, made it his daily business, to keep those bonds of community strong within the family and extended to the multitude of chosen family across the US and British Virgin Islands communities.

'Benny's' vigilance for protecting and sustaining family and community is what fueled the arguably superhuman strength displayed the fateful night in 1980 when he singlehandedly dislodged a bank of louvered windows from the back bedroom of Janice Daniels fire-engulfed home at Estate Nadir rescuing her and her five sons. Once the family was safe, he coordinated men from the neighborhood to keep the fire weakened and contained until the fire department arrived. The home was destroyed, and Ms. Daniels suffered moderate burns and injury, as her sons were rescued first. But, by the grace of God, no lives were lost.

'Benny's' oldest grandchild, Dr. Robert Chalwell Jr. shared the story of the dramatic event stating that "the day after the blaze, evidence of what could have been a complete tragedy was found on the West side of the Stephens home which sustained minor damage including discolored and peeling paint, the smell of burnt wood, and melted yellow 5-gallon water bottles." Cousin Benny's intervention averted a greater tragedy that could have affected all of the neighboring homes on that hill. Each home was only separated by staircases up from the narrow road where generations of neighborhood children played. The Stephens family home

still stands next to the now vacant Daniels family home which is next to the blue and white house on the 'lil' hill up the road from the purple shop.

Community heroes are not all the same, so the family and community man who defines Mr. Benburin Stephens makes him more than an example of putting community first in action. By naming this stretch of road after Mr. Benburin Stephens, it gives future generations someone with whom they can identify as their own, a proud son of the Virgin Islands who prioritized the wellbeing of his family, his neighbors, and this community before himself.

We, the deep roots and proud branches of the Thomas, Skelton, Stout families, which extend through the Virgin Islands to Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, the continental United States and beyond, thank you for honoring one of our great sons.

Respectfully Yours,
Ms. Monife Stout
On behalf of the TSS Families