



Testimony on Bill 35-0107 honoring Dr. Fenella Cooper

February 25, 2024

Good Afternoon to the Honorable Carla J. Joseph Chairperson of the Committee on Government Operations, Veterans Affairs, and Consumer Protection, bill sponsor Honorable Marvin A. Blyden, and all the other senators present. My name is Gerald Walters, and I currently serve as the District Science Coordinator for the St Thomas- St John District.

It gives me great pleasure to testify today in support of Bill 35-0107, an act honoring and commending and honoring the late Dr. Fenella Cooper for her contributions in education, sports, and culture, and the naming of the University of the Virgin Islands Tennis courts, located on the Orville Kean Campus on St Thomas, US Virgin Islands, in her name.

In 1984 Fenella Cooper was a teacher at the Addelita Cancryn Junior High School where she was instrumental in having tennis courts as part of the schools physical plant. Although Fenella Cooper did not teach physical education, she managed to have tennis classes after school. Two of her outstanding students that ended up on my tennis team at the Charlotte Amalie High School were Wayne Tyson and John Wilkins; both students would eventually become ranked junior tennis players and receive tennis scholarships to colleges in the United States.

I started my teaching career at the Charlotte Amalie High School in 1985, and left C.A.H.S. in 1997. Somewhere in that time period Dr. Cooper transferred to the Charlotte Amalie High School as a business teacher. One of the classes that she taught that stuck out to me was a class called Life Skills. During some of our chats on the tennis court, I was intrigued from some of the life preparing topics that was covered in that class which included writing resumes, writing checks, and even basic weekly and monthly budgeting. Her other famous class was called Creative writing, and Dr. Cooper would play her guitar in class as the students sang.

At the early years of my teaching at CAHS, the school tennis team actually practiced at the Long Bay Tennis Courts which currently houses the Rising Stars Steel Orchestra Summer Program. During the later years of my tennis career, tennis practice moved to the Subbase Tennis Courts, and Dr. Cooper's two daughters were part of the tennis team. Her entire family played tennis.

Dr. Cooper helped influence the addition of a tennis court at the Charlotte Amalie High School, after the Long Bay Tennis Courts were closed as part of the Yacht Haven Grande project. Dr. Cooper also taught tennis classes to interested teachers and staff members after school and on Saturdays on the school courts.

Two other co-workers who also was instrumental in this effort was Miss Doris Hodge the registrar and Miss Cynthia Syms the Arts and Craft teacher.

Dr. Fenella Cooper was also an active member of the St Thomas Racket Club. She was one of the most patient persons I knew. If someone brought their child to me to learn to play tennis, I would always refer them to Dr. Cooper.

As the Charlotte Amalie Tennis Team grew larger and larger, it became important to have fundraisers. Dr. Cooper was involved in just about every fundraiser and was also called upon to travel with the team which at one time surpassed 10 students. The team traveled between St. Thomas, St. Croix and Puerto Rico

Dr. Cooper also helped with forming the first Inter Governmental Tennis Tournament with Education easily fielding two teams. She usually competed on one of the winning teams.

Dr. Cooper was also instrumental in helping organize the St Thomas Racket Club Juniors around 1997. By then some prominent students had developed their skills to the point where they could qualify for tennis scholarships at Division 1 schools; this included players like Nicole Syms, Sasha Gumbs, and Kirk Thomas.

Although I've talked a lot about Dr. Cooper's organizing skills, I would be amiss if I didn't talk about her tennis competitiveness. Dr. Cooper and I competed in many mix doubles tournaments to include the Hugh Smith Open, Doris Hodge Tennis Tournament, V.I. Tennis Open and the American Tennis Association Nationals. The lasting impression I have with competing with Dr. Cooper is that just like she was a problem solver off the tennis court, she was also one on the tennis court. If we were losing a match, we would have some serious strategy discussions and figure out a way to win. Playing doubles requires good communication skills and Dr. Cooper possessed those necessary skills.

Dr. Fenella Cooper didn't have a lot of spectacular shots, but she was consistent and extremely competitive. Her biggest pet peeve was cheating. If she felt you were blatantly cheating her, she would pick up her stuff and walk off the court, no long discussions and no arguments. This characteristic eventually transferred to all the students that she was able to influence on the tennis court.

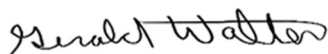
Dr. Fenella Cooper like most other educators ventured off to U.V.I. after school, where she taught the UVI Tennis Classes. This allowed UVI students to learn some other sport other than basketball and volleyball. During U.V.I. Concert Band rehearsals, I would hear the music students talking about their tennis experiences, and from the excitement in their conversations, I already knew who their instructor was.

Dr. Cooper was actually instrumental in helping Miss Cynthia Syms and myself get our certification as tennis instructors. She actually read the poster from the American Tennis Association Tournament in Washington DC and was unselfish enough to share it with us. It was information that most of us overlooked. This qualification actually worked in our favor later on in our careers.

The Virgin Islands was lucky to have a person like Dr. Fenella Cooper move here to the Virgin Islands and give back so much to this community. She served above and beyond, "service above self".

I will take pleasure in attending the naming of the U.V.I. Tennis Courts in her honor, and playing tennis on the Fenella Cooper Tennis Courts.

Respectfully,



Gerald Walters