

IN HONOR OF WILLARD JOHN

By Whitman T. Browne, Ph.D.

I met Willard John for the first time in late 1984. It was probably during the month of November. Mr. John and a number of other teachers had travelled to St. Thomas, from St. Croix, to participate in a special cultural education program, which I was leading for the US Virgin Islands Department of Education. Over the years I have often been intrigued by Mr. John's interest in history, and matters related to culture. To the best of my knowledge, from that time when we met, just short of 40 years ago, Mr. John has maintained keen interest in Virgin Islands, Caribbean, and African cultures. Through those years, he has done much more than read, to observe and learn about the history, plus other intricacies of cultures, for himself. In time, Mr. John developed the skills and blossomed as a competent VI culture-bearer, particularly as a Moko Jumbie dancer, an art-form he began learning about, way back in 1975. From about 1979, Willard became a leader and force in the revitalization of the Moko Jumbie displays on St. Croix. He initiated and developed a variety of techniques, also strategies, by which he shares his rich knowledge of history and culture with people in the USVI, around the Caribbean, and the wider world. Then, as Mr. John set his long term goals, he managed to secure the support and competences of both his wife and son, now integral parts of his cultural reach and creations.

As dynamic as Mr. John's family team is, it has not been the only avenue for cultural contributions from him. In 1993, he started a performing group, calling it The Guardians of Culture, which grew into an outstanding dance ensemble that still functions, especially during carnival seasons. To date, Mr. John is very pleased that over 400 young people, male and female, have taken advantage of his initiatives, and learned what they could about Moko Jumbie dances, while growing their abilities in that art. Much of what one sees about the Moko Jumbies today, is different from the presentations seen back in 1975, when Willard began his cultural journey. He personally introduced a higher level of dexterity and one would even say, a higher degree of daring, to that venturesome art form. Willard is still very proud that back in 1979, he was one of the few Moko Jumbie dancers chosen, and given a special invitation to perform in Miami, during the half-time show for that year's Super Bowl.

Despite the time and effort his cultural troves take from him, Willard John, a committed Virgin Islander, has been giving back to his islands much more than the intricacies from his cultural creations and journey. For a number of years he has been a keen and effective public school teacher, assistant principal, and principal, in the service of the Virgin Islands Department of Education. Mr. John has also been serving with the Rotary Club, from as far back as 1988. He is still very active on the Board of Directors for Community Development on St. Croix. The Time Square area, and certain non-profits on the island, have benefitted from the agency's development thrusts and projects. Additionally, Mr. John serves with the board that oversees the Port Authority, and with the Frederiksted Credit Union. For a long time too, he has been part of the Board of Directors for the St. Croix Agricultural Food Fair. In his honor, during the 2023 – 2024, Crucian Christmas Festival, the celebratory and honorary name for the fair-grounds was "Willard's Mokoville,"

I knew that Mr. John was earnestly engaged in the community before, and since he retired from education. However, until I did the specific research, I had no knowledge of the extent to which he has been giving back to these islands. It is the case that Willard is very humble, and does not boast or call

attention to himself, or the effort he makes to help the people of his surrounding communities. He becomes theatrical only when on his Moko Jumbie stilts, and part of a grand performance. Despite that unassuming, quiet stance Willard depicts, it is a wonderful and timely gesture that in 2024, the VI Legislature has seen it fit, and opted to honor Mr. John for his many cultural, and other contributions to the US Virgin Islands. Mr. Willard John has made very special markings on the sands of his time. Such recognition of one's contributions to his society, has very real meaning, while that person still lives. Now, Mr. John will have the opportunity to reflect, smile, pinch himself, and say quietly, "I am grateful that my love for culture, and for my islands, touched lives, made significant impression on minds; while some people paid attention, and noted my varied contributions.