

## Testimony in Honor of Willard John

June 28, 2024

Good morning, Honorable Senator Carla J. Joseph, Chair of the Committee on Government Operations, Veterans Affairs, and Consumer Protection, and the Honorable Marise C. James, sponsor of Bill No. 35-0195, other Senators present, members of the listening audience, and those present here today.

My name is Aminah Saleem and today I am truly blessed and grateful to be able to honor my dear friend, Willard John. Willard is not just a friend. He has been an honorary family member for over the last 30 years. I have known Willard John as a friend, neighbor, educator, Stage manager, film location manager master Moko Jumbie, Moko Jumbie instructor, and Cultural icon.

My Moko Jumbie journey with Willard started in 1993 when my son Amir Saleem and his friend Victor Quinones spent an entire summer walking around Estate Strawberry on wooden stilts that they made out of an old closet door. They wanted to be Moko Jumbies so badly they tried desperately to teach themselves. That September my sister Anna Thompson a counselor at Richard Richards School was inspired by them to start a group at Ricardo Richards, and she called Willard John. Who else would she call? He was one of the best master Moko Jumbies dancing since 1974 in the Virgin Islands. Willard responded immediately and came to the school and said "Yes I'd love to start a group" and that is when the Ricardo Richards Moko Jumbies were formed with my deceased son Amir, Victor Quinones, Victor's two sisters, and two other Ricardo Richards' students. Now we are known as the Guardians of Culture Moko Jumbies.

How many people in St. Croix can say they have held the youth organization together for over 30 years as the leader and been able to instruct over 500 students during that time with no funding from the Government volunteering all of his time? We practiced every Saturday and did our first parade one year later each year the group grew and kept growing. Under the loving care of Willard John, my sister Anna Thompson, and Willard's wife Curliss Solomon John, our amazing secret weapon who has made every costume you see our Moko Jumbie in for the past 31 years.

Willard is a man of action so many of us can come and tell Willard's story: Willard, the educator who taught in the Virgin Islands educational system for over 30 years. Willard, the production manager has been on the stage for productions for so many activities that have come to St Croix over the years. Willard a dedicated Rotarian who has been a Rotarian for as long as I have known him. He is truly a man of service to his community.

Willard can get people to work with him basically out of respect for his work ethic. He has many people who work with him over his vast number of activities. And yes I can tell you that if you have ever worked with Willard, you know when he gives you a task, and you do it well it is your job forever. I know because Charlita Schjang and I have been his ground Moko Jumbies volunteering for over thirty years. That is how you know he is

special because he can get so many people to work with him mostly volunteering for a long time.

Willard's motto is "The best way to preserve our culture is to live it" and he does. He is the quintessential leader who taught all of the Moko Jumbies that they are professional stilt dancers, it is a profession that they can get paid for; it's not just a hobby, and they must always honor our ancestors by carrying on the tradition of being completely covered.

Willard leaves a strong legacy of educational service, community leadership, and youth nation-building. The young people who have stayed with us for years are working in all walks of life as business professionals, educators, medical professionals, entrepreneurs, and of course professional stilt dancers that you see at our hotels, weddings, and special occasions. Many of them are still in our community, many have moved aboard all of them are contributing where they are living.

Now in 2024 with the largest amount of Moko Jumbies we have ever had he is diligently mentoring a new instructor to carry on the tradition. His forward thinking will ensure God willing that thirty years from now Moko Jumbies will continue to be the number one attraction for Virgin Islanders, tourists, and visitors.

Madam Chair, on behalf of the Guardians of Culture Moko Jumbies I humbly congratulate Willard John for receiving this great honor and living a life of dedication to the Virgin Islands, sharing our culture, and honoring our ancestors.