

Superior Court of the Virgin Islands

Chambers of
DEBRA S. WATLINGTON
Presiding Judge of the Superior Court
and
Judge of the Family Division
St. Thomas/St. John Division



(340) 693-6436
debra.watlington@vicourts.org

P.O. Box 70
Charlotte Amalie
St. Thomas, VI 00804

35th LEGISLATURE OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS

**COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS, VETERANS AFFAIRS AND
CONSUMER PROTECTION**

LEGISLATIVE STATEMENT ON BILL NO. 35-0286

BY

**DEBRA S. WATLINGTON, PRESIDING JUDGE
SUPERIOR COURT OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS**

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 24, 2024

Good morning, Honorable Senator Carla Joseph, Chair of the Committee on Government Operations, Veteran Affairs, and Consumer Protection, Honorable Senators of the Committee and other Senators; Chief Justice Rhys Hodge, Associate Justice Maria Cabret, Retired Judge Brenda Hollar and members of the listening and viewing audience.

I am Debra Smith Watlington, Presiding Judge of the Superior Court of the Virgin Islands.

Thank you for the invitation to comment on Bill No. 35-0286 which is intended to honor and commend the Honorable Judge Emeritus, Verne Antonio Hodge, for his dedicated service to the people of the Virgin Islands and his jurisprudence. I am humbled by the opportunity to lend my voice in support of the bill.

The bill is a fitting tribute to a man who is a Virgin Islands jewel. I will not repeat Judge Verne Hodge's numerous and valuable roles held during his professional life.

The record speaks for itself and others are much more qualified and able to account that history.

Instead, I prefer to talk about Judge Verne Hodge, the man that I and hundred others have learned from and came to know. I consider him to be one of the most impactful, influential and brilliant individuals in the Virgin Islands.

He is not only a proven and brilliant jurist for his courage and fairness, but also a strategist, analyst, advisor, the consummate politician and simply an exceptional human being.

The Honorable Verne Hodge, Judge Emeritus of the Superior Court of the Virgin Islands is the first and only person to carry such a designation, and for good reason. He confidently blazed the trail to transform the Municipal Court to the Territorial Court which is now the Superior Court of the Virgin Islands. He believed that Virgin Islands Courts should handle all local civil and criminal matters, which lead the expansion of the jurisdiction of the Superior Court to preside over all civil cases regardless of the amount in controversy and criminal cases, including major felonies. In my opinion, this was the most profound achievement for the Virgin Islands judiciary along with the establishment of the Virgin Islands Supreme Court.

He masterfully defended the annual budget requests for the courts and attempts to “trip him up” were countered with eloquent responses supported with documentation that quieted any challenge and resulted in budget approvals.

He acquired capital funds to construct the very courthouse which this bill intends to name in his honor. In 1993, when it was completed, it was perhaps the most modern government facility in St. Thomas. It is significant, that Judge Hodge insisted that

local plumbers, electricians and other local craftsmen worked on this project to get a “piece of the pie”.

Judge Hodge assembled a talented staff of professionals, primarily from within this community. He created a work environment that attracted the best talent and made sure employees were paid their worth.

Judge Hodge recruited and surrounded himself with other exceptional jurists, who worked with him to administer justice, including the first female Judge, the late Eileen R. Petersen, the late Ishmael A. Meyers, the late Raymond L. Finch (for whom the Supreme Court Building in Frederiksted, St. Croix is named), and retired judge Henry L. Feuerzeig, Esq., among others.

His success was everyone else’s success. He managed to maintain a loyal and dedicated team of talented professionals, which included a very competent Clerk of Court and Administrator in Mrs. Viola E. Smith, and many others. It was Mrs. Smith who was charged with the task of executing the many projects, some of which seemed insurmountable, but which he insisted must be done and which proved to be worthy.

Judge Hodge has an exceptional ability to maintain relationships with political aspirants, senators and every governor regardless of their political affiliation. He provides honest advice to all who asked and who thought needed to know. At the core of everything he does is his strong belief and confidence in the People of the Virgin Islands and Caribbean people in general; especially the underprivileged, along with his genuine belief in doing good.

Of all of Judge Hodge’s achievements and accomplishments, I dare say, other than his family, his most cherished and dearest is the Superior Court’s Rising Stars Youth

Steele Orchestra. While this program was born out of concern for his own daughter's violation of her curfew, he was quickly attracted to the art of steel pan playing and inspired by its magnetism. He believed that the children of the Virgin Islands would be well served by investing in this program, their future and thus the community's future. Judge Hodge conceived the Rising Stars Program and directed me, then Coordinator of the Pretrial Intervention Program, to coordinate the first summer steel band program in 1981. He insisted that the program promotes discipline, academics and hard work for which the program's motto was developed and by which all participants are guided.

“NOTHING IS SO COMPLICATED THAT IT CANNOT BE SIMPLIFIED BY HARD WORK”.

The Rising Stars Program provided lifelong opportunities for its members who travelled as V.I. ambassadors and represented the V.I. with distinction in Pasadena, California at the Tournament of Roses Parade, in Taiwan and Japan to name a few. Hundreds of former members have become professionals and succeeded in their own right, locally and nationally. Due to its high demand, program instructors were loaned to schools to develop similar programs in public schools, which resulted in enough quality steel bands to have panoramas during St. Thomas Carnivals. The program still is such a success 43 years later, due to the continued support it receives from Chief Justice Rhys Hodge and this legislature. As such, I recommend that Bill 35-0286 include a provision regarding Judge Hodge's creation of the Rising Stars Program to fully reflect his pride and joy.

The constant theme in all that Judge Hodge has done is providing **a fair opportunity** for others to succeed when they prepare and work hard. I am a beneficiary of opportunities that he provided, from summer employment, to Project Coordinator of

the Pretrial Intervention Program when I graduated from college to being a law clerk to the then presiding judge which helped me to prepare for the practice of law. Similarly, Judge Hodge has a trail of people and families who he helped with financing their college education, ensuring local business secured contracts and simply helping the average person on the street, some of whom he knows and others remain unknown to him.

To have his name prominently and permanently inscribed on the courthouse of the Superior Court Building will be a living legacy and a well-earned tribute to the Honorable Judge Emeritus Verne A. Hodge, a man of distinction.

Thank you.

Respectfully submitted,



Debra S. Watlington
Presiding Judge