

TESTIMONY

Committee on rules and Judiciary Of the 35th Legislature of the Virgin Islands

Submitted by Donna M. Christensen, MD

December 7, 2023

Good morning chairwoman Senator Diane Capehart, Vice Chair, Senator Milton Potter, members of the Committee, other members of the 35th Legislature, legislative staff, fellow nominees, in- chamber, radio and tv audiences, fellow Virgin Islanders.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of my nomination to the Board of Trustees of the Historically American, Uniquely Caribbean, Globally Interactive, Prestigious University of the Virgin Islands.

It is my honor to be here before you today as a nominee for this important position, and I am grateful to our Governor, Albert Bryan, Jr. for considering me worthy and submitting my name. I also want to thank Chairwoman Capehart for taking the time to meet with me to answer any questions I might have had,

A little about me:

Although I was born in Teaneck New Jersey while my Dad was completing his term of duty in the U.S. Army at the end of World War II, and my Mother was living with her parents, I consider my navel string to be buried right here in St. Croix. As soon as my father completed his law degree we came home. For the longest time I thought I arrived as an infant until Ancestry.com showed me on a ship heading this way at just under 2 years old.

I spent my early years on Queen Cross Street in Christiansted, in what is now known as the Wiesner building, at a time when Christiansted was a more residential and caring and sharing community. I spent a lot of time with my grandmother and great-grandmother on Hill Street - enough time to be considered a Hillside. We later moved to Orange Grove across from what is now the Kennedy Housing Community.

I attended St Mary's School from Kindergarten through 8th grade, but then asked my parents if I could join some friends at Robinson School in Puerto Rico. They agreed and I spent my 8th grade there. After Robinson discontinued housing for off-island students, I completed the rest of my High School at a small Catholic boarding school, the St. Joseph's Mountain School just outside Monticello New York, from which I graduated in 1962. Because I kept (and still keep) close friends with my St Mary's classmates you will find that I am considered a part of that class of 1962.

As you can see from my transcripts, I attended St. Mary's College in Notre Dame Indiana from 1962 to 1966. In 1966 I was one of the first women to attend a class at Notre Dame. I then attended the George Washington School of Medicine from 1966 to 1970. My internship was at Presbyterian/Pacific Medical Center in San Francisco. I completed my Family Practice Residency at what was then Freedmen's Hospital - Now the Howard University Medical Center - in Washington DC at the end of 1974. I returned home in January of 1975 and in that same month I began working at the Ingeborg Nesbitt emergency Room and clinic.

I had never intended to go into private practice, but at the end of 1975, Dr. Estigoy asked me if I would take care of his practice while he went on a 2 week vacation. He never returned and that's how I began my own private practice.

At that time one could not work in an emergency room and have a private practice so I then took a position at MCH and continued through several different positions at the Department of Health including Assistant Commissioner and then Acting Commissioner while Dr Heath ran for Lieutenant Governor with Derek Hodge.

During a couple of years when there was a shortage of pediatricians, I covered pediatrics and nursery at Charles Harwood. I also spent three years in the early 1980's as Medical Director of what as then called the Frederiksted Health Center and thereafter was Medical Director at the Governor Juan Luis Hospital until being appointed Asst. Commissioner by Governor Alexander Farrelly. My last position at the Department of Health was as a Community Health Physician working in the clinics. I resigned in 1966 after winning my first term as Delegate to Congress. Other than my time as Medical Director at the Hospital and FHC, all of my work with the Department of Health took place at the Charles Harwood Memorial Hospital. During those years (1975 to 1997) I maintained a busy private practice in Christiansted, that included in-hospital care and house calls.

For the rest of my testimony, I'm going to focus on my relationship with the University of the Virgin Islands. I have been involved with UVI in many ways:

Other than attending graduations and campus activities with friends, the earliest formal engagement was being a part of what I think was called the Minority Research Advisory Committee. These involved annual meetings in the theater on the St. Thomas campus at which we would present and hear reports on research that had been done. I don't recall the years I did that, but it was well before my election to Congress.

I also participated regularly in the Summer Leadership programs for students from the VI and other parts of the country.

As a Member of Congress I was an active member of the EPSCoR Board (Established Program to Stimulate Competitive Research) and was involved in early discussions about establishing a Medical School. I also continued to participate in the Leadership Programs.

One Summer I was successful, in inviting the Director of the then Center for Minority Research at the National Institutes of Health to come to St. Thomas to speak to the students. That visit eventually became the impetus for a planning grant that later established the Caribbean Exploratory Research Center at UVI.

After its establishment I assisted in planning the Center's annual meetings and securing keynote and other guest speakers. One year their conference was held in St. Croix and was a collaboration between the Congressional Black Caucus Health Brain Trust, which I chaired and the National Health Disparity Conference. In addition to many renowned experts, at least 12 members of the CBC attended and participated. In recognition of my role in its establishment the Center created a Lecture in my name. The relationship that began back then continues today.

After Hurricane Irma/Maria, I learned that there was recovery related funding through the US Department of Education that UVI had not taken advantage of because no one had been able to successfully make contact with the administration. We facilitated a meeting that resolved the issue. I continue to inform UVI of any opportunities that I become aware of.

I have also represented UVI on several national entities to ensure that they were at the table. One of them is the All Healers Mental Health Alliance, which is also attended by Dr Gloria Callwood. Another is the HBCU Emergency Management Consortium. I continue to participate in both.

Under the consortium, we were able to have one cohort of UVI students trained in CERT (Citizens Emergency Management Training) which is a major goal of the consortium at all HBCUs and something we need to continue. Several UVI students have participated in programs with those from other HBCUs.

I continue to work with both entities and was also able to include UVI in the Emerging Technologies Consortium whose goal is to increase HBCUs research and contracting with the the Department of Defense and other Federal agencies. Major universities receive as much as 40% of their annual funding through these relationships, while HBCU's, MSIs and Tribal Colleges share but a "sliver" of the funding they get.

So for me, an early recipient of an honorary degree and therefore an alumna, becoming a member of the UVI Board of Trustees, would be a position I look forward to. I hope that in that more formal relationship I will be able to do even more.

Of course the Research Center and the Medical School would be paramount among the entities that I would look forward to lending my support to. I would also hope to join the administration and faculty in their efforts to enhance the student experience and opportunities, but also be happy to assist in any and all areas of need.

This concludes my official testimony. Again I thank the governor for this nomination. I hope for your favorable consideration and I look forward to any questions you might have.

Respectfully Submitted:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Donna M. Christensen". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Donna M. Christensen, MD

