

STATEMENT OF YVETTE D. ROSS-EDWARDS, ESQ.

RE: MY JUDICIAL NOMINATION TO THE SUPERIOR COURT OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS, DISTRICT OF ST. CROIX

The Honorable Senator Diane T. Capehart, Chairman of the Rules and Judiciary Committee; other honorable members of the Rules and Judiciary Committee; honorable members of the 35th Legislature; family, friends, colleagues, and the listening and viewing public.

Good morning,

My name is Yvette Ross-Edwards. The Honorable Governor Albert Bryan Jr. has nominated me to be a judge at the Superior Court of the Virgin Islands, District of St. Croix. Today I will share the information upon which I believe the Governor relied and deemed me fit for nomination. I understand that the members of the Rules and Judiciary Committee must review my character, legal experience, skills, and training for the position and make recommendations to “the Body as a Whole” on the nomination. While I don’t usually relish talking about my achievements, I will demonstrate, through my experiences, associations, and actions, what makes me a ready and appropriate selection to serve as a judge on the Superior Court of the Virgin Islands in the District of St. Croix. Before I proceed, however, I thank this Committee for its role in this process.

I am a product of parents born in the Virgin Islands with a family lineage going back at least five generations on each side. I am also a product of an extended family which reaches beyond the shores of our islands into the broader Caribbean and the continental United States. More impactfully, I am a product of St. Croix, my community village.

I was raised in a single-parent household by my mother, Genevieve Edney. There, I learned the ethics of hard work, independence, courage, persistence, and perseverance. My only child status carried little weight as I became a part of every family household, with a guaranteed seat at every dinner table, a place to rest my head, and shared chore responsibilities in each home, in the yards, and on my grandfather’s farm. My family village surrounded me, instilling respect for authority, a thirst for education, and a love of my community.

By example and without much explanation, my father, Edgar D. Ross, former Judge of the Superior Court of the Virgin Islands, counseled me that there are no shortcuts in life: work hard, that the law shows no favors, but is necessary to civilized living; that no one, regardless of background is above or beyond the law; that the practice of law, while a playing field for legal mischief, is where persons challenge the strength and constitutionality of our rules, a necessary part of our strife for justice.

I understood that in the courts, laws are made and enforced; the courtroom ensures that our community’s safety and sanctity are protected, and every human being’s rights are guarded.

Additionally, I learned respect for law enforcement which was reinforced by members of my family who were proud members of the Virgin Islands Police Department.

I am also a product of the ball field, where I would often be found engaged in rigorous and competitive training and ball playing as a fastpitch softball catcher. My dedication and hard

work were rewarded with my selection on several St. Croix and VI teams to compete in various Caribbean tournaments and a place on the Virgin Islands Fast Pitch All-Star Softball Team at the Pan American Games in Cuba. I later joined other softballers to revive fastpitch softball on St. Croix and train young ladies in the game through the Croixettes Fast Pitch Softball League. Furthermore, I held leadership roles with the Elmo Plaskett West Little League and the Babe Ruth West Baseball League.

I was a compilation of all these experiences and character traits when I graduated from high school forty (40) years ago, in 1983, from St. Dunstan's Episcopal School in Christiansted, St. Croix, a school that I attended since kindergarten. St. Dunstan's was associated with the Episcopal Church in which my spiritual faith was molded since birth at the St. Paul's Anglican/ Episcopal Church in Frederiksted. At St. Dunstan's, I was my class president and the school's student government president, and I played in every sports team that I could, even if it meant competing with the boys.

I am nonetheless a quiet, reserved person who speaks only when the weight of my words carries meaning. Nevertheless, I often strive to find magic with the stroke of my pen. And such it was when I graduated from Hampton University, formerly Hampton Institute in Virginia, in 1987 with a Bachelor of Arts in English and the English Department's highest award. I graduated in the top 5% of my graduating class, Magna Cum Laude. In addition, I earned the distinction of being the athlete with the highest academic achievement, having played college volleyball and softball in a then NCAA Division II college.

Following Hampton University, I furthered my education at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst in a graduate program that garnered me a Master of Education with a concentration in English and certified me to teach in 30 states. I also obtained experience teaching in the Boston Public School System at the Boston Latin Magnet School in Boston, Massachusetts. In addition, I worked at a corporation in Bedford, Massachusetts, teaching ESL to adult employees.

In 1988, I was driven to pursue a law degree. Two weeks after completing my master's program, I entered Albany Law School in Albany, New York, on scholarship. I graduated from Albany Law School in May 1991 while obtaining experience in criminal defense work with the New York State Public Defenders Office and the New York State Defenders Association under a program that allowed senior law students to obtain practical legal experience. I also represented the mentally and physically challenged at the Law School's Disability Law Clinic.

I took the Virgin Islands Bar Examination in July 1991 and, upon passing, was sworn in and admitted into the practice of law in the United States Virgin Islands in July 1992. I was subsequently admitted to practice law before the District Court of the Virgin Islands and the Third Circuit Court of Appeal, all of which I remain an active member.

Today, I remain a person of integrity and strong work ethic. In addition, I practice respect for everyone regardless of one's station and respect for the rule of law, character traits reinforced and further enhanced with my legal career.

My first job as an attorney was with the law offices of Ross and Cannon, later the Law Offices of George W. Cannon, Jr. Then attorneys Edgar D. Ross and George W. Cannon Jr.

introduced me to the general practice of law, encouraging my client representation in areas of family, property disputes, deeds, civil litigation, traffic, criminal and landlord-tenant. At this stage in my career, I represented clients in bench trials.

In 1996, I worked as legal counsel and assistant director for the Office of the Lieutenant Governor in the Division of Banking and Insurance. There, I was exposed to insurance and banking regulations.

I returned to private practice in 2001 and worked for the Law Offices of Eric Moore, which in 2003 became Moore & Sopuch. There, I was introduced to insurance defense work. I worked with and was mentored by Attorney Eric Moore, one of the prominent insurance defense attorneys at the time, on slip and fall, medical malpractice, food poisoning, product liability, and discrimination cases. I also learned the value of legal case management programs to manage an office caseload effectively and efficiently.

In 2004, an opportunity availed itself. Then-Attorney George W. Cannon, Jr. was moving forward to be the Magistrate Judge of the District Court, and I took advantage of the opportunity to assume his practice. In over two weeks, I moved from purely insurance defense back to a general practice firm with some insurance defense, family, civil, criminal, personal injury, and contract matters. I assumed representation of approximately 75 cases about which I knew nothing but on which I made myself competent. I accepted a legal practice with which I had no experience operating but had to ensure the efficient operation and management of the office. Moreover, I assumed a business that not even my years with the Business and Professional Women's Organization could have prepared me for. But I invested the time, worked the cases, learned from the challenges, and persevered.

For over nineteen years, I ran a successful law office. When I opened my office, the now Honorable Magistrate Judge Yolán Brow Ross of the Superior Court remained with me as an associate attorney. Then, in 2005 the now Honorable Emile Henderson III, Magistrate Judge of the District Court of the Virgin Islands, joined me as an associate and later became my partner. In 2012, my office moved away from insurance defense and began accepting medical malpractice and plaintiff litigation work. I also handled criminal, civil, and contract litigation, real estate, some estate planning, probate, and family matters. In addition, I provided contract work for various quasi-government agencies, including the Virgin Islands Water and Power Authority, the Virgin Islands Public Finance Authority, and the Virgin Islands Port Authority as an insurance defense counsel.

During my private practice, I zealously represented clients in over 40 criminal matters, of which 11 went before the jury at the Superior Court and District Court. I also tried seven civil trials on property disputes, contracts, and personal injury, one of which was a jury trial. The others successfully settled. I was a member of the Criminal Justice Act panel for pro bono criminal appointments at both Superior and District Courts and am on the family court-appointed panel. On each matter, I strived to become and remain competent in my areas of practice. Like some attorneys, sixteen-hour days, seven days a week, were not unusual. It was what was necessary to get the work done.

My office further evolved in recent years with the advent of Covid 19. My law practice shifted primarily to probate, estate planning, and real estate with some civil and family litigation matters. I am currently a contract counsel for the Virgin Islands Casino Control Commission.

In reviewing my 32-plus years of legal practice, I am proud of my ability to reduce legal concepts to simple terms that my clients could understand, which allows me to be an effective communicator. I honed the skill of careful listening and then deductive and analytical reasoning.

I served within the legal community on the Virgin Islands Bar Association's Governing Board for several terms starting in 2014 and as Chair and Vice Chair on its Access to Justice Committee, where I currently serve. The Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of the Virgin Islands, the honorable Rhys Hodge, appointed me to serve on the Board of Professional Responsibility. I served on the District Court Committee for the revision of its criminal and civil rules and the appointment and reappointment of the Federal Public Defender. I volunteer to provide pro bono legal services through Legal Services of the Virgin Islands, on which I have also served on its Board of Directors, and I offered free legal services to farming community members. I currently serve on the Bar's Committee on the Revision of the Probate Rules.

All the while, I have been married for 28 years to Percival "Tahemah" Edwards, a local activist, historian, and advocate for farmers' rights and the preservation of Virgin Islands culture. I have supported his vision as President of St. Croix Farmers in Action, Inc., and the Bethlehem Restoration Project. In addition, I have volunteered and chaired the Crucian Coconut Festival for several years.

My husband and I raised three children on St. Croix through the private and public-school systems. Malcolm, age 30, is a graduate of Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia, with a Bachelor of Science in Mechanical Engineering. Misah, age 25, is a University of the Virgin Islands graduate with a Bachelor of Science in Accounting. In addition, she has a Master of Science in Coaching Psychology from Liberty University in Atlanta, Georgia. My youngest, Mahalia, age 23, graduated from Howard University in Washington DC with a Bachelor of Business Administration in Computer Information Technology. She is pursuing an aviation career with the United States Airforce and will graduate from flight training on May 19, 2023. I am also a grandmother of two grandsons, Liam (2 years) and Luca (10 months). Without reservation, I am proud of my family, and they, too, reflect my accomplishments.

Incidentally, my children also kept me connected to our community. I was voted in and served as Parent/Teacher Association President at the Good Hope School and as a member of its Board of Trustees. Before Good Hope School, I served on the Board of Trustees for the Community United Methodist School. In addition, I willingly sponsored the Educational Complex Lady Barracudas Basketball Team to a tournament in Puerto Rico. I was also a strong parent supporter of the AYSO Grass Roots Soccer Program, in which my three children grew up and played on the Virgin Islands' national teams at various levels.

Spiritually, I am grounded and have served within my church in many capacities, including Sunday School teacher, Outreach Committee Chair, Convention Deputy, and on the

Church's Vestry. Most recently, I served as the Regional Dean for St. Croix under the Rt Rev. Bishop Ambrose Gumbs of the Episcopal Diocese of the Virgin Islands and deputy to the National Convention. In addition, I am Vice Chair of the Title IV Disciplinary Committee for the National Episcopal Church and the Virgin Islands Diocese's Church Attorney.

It has been said that good character is not formed in a week or a month; it is created gradually, day by day, over a lifetime of experiences. Equally, an accomplished attorney works hard at her skill, fights for her client, and exhibits good character. Senators, this is who I am, personally and professionally. I shared with you the experiences that molded my character and developed the skills and traits that will impact my effectiveness as a judge if confirmed.

Today, you judge me on my qualifications developed in the classroom, the courtroom, and the community. My history reveals that I have the temperament, work ethic, and legal competence for the position. But, most importantly, I am a ready nominee. I will endeavor to keep my cases on track, to deliberate and rule with firmness, fairness, and compassion, and to sustain the community's confidence in our judicial institution.

In closing, I humbly thank God for opening this opportunity. I thank the Honorable Governor Albert Bryan Jr for seeing in me the skills and character needed for this position and nominating me. Finally, I thank my family, friends, and colleagues who have expressed confidence and support for my nomination, some of whom are here today.

And I thank you, the Rules and Judiciary Committee members, for your attention and consideration. As the law mandates, my nomination can only be confirmed with the advice and consent of the Virgin Islands Legislature. I remain available to answer questions about the qualifications that make me a ready nominee.