

Good morning, members of The Committee On Rules and the Judiciary, Committee Chair Senator Diane Capehart, and the viewing and listening audience.

It is a tremendous honor to speak today in support of this measure that pays tribute to one of the greatest educators ever to serve our community: Ms. Georgia Francis.

I want to emphasize that I did not say “music educator,” but simply “educator.” This distinction is intentional because terms like art, music, and physical education are often used as qualifiers before “educator,” unintentionally diminishing their importance compared to subjects like science, math, or English. This phenomenon is not unique to the Virgin Islands but reflects a widespread misunderstanding of the profound impact arts and music educators can have. The lessons learned in these classes often extend far beyond formal education into real-life skills and experiences. For instance, I cannot recall using the Pythagorean theorem outside of my high school geometry class, but the lessons I learned in Ms. Francis’s classroom have stayed with me to this day.

Georgia Francis is an indomitable force that has provided hundreds of Virgin Islands students with a unique educational experience that blended discipline, structure, fun, learning, and exposure.

As a student at Charlotte Amalie High School, I remember the music suite feeling like a world of its own. It operated differently from the rest of the school. There was no question about who was in charge, a clear hierarchy was established, and even the facilities, down to the bathrooms, were kept in better condition than the rest of the school.

The respect students—both in the band and outside of it—had for Ms. Francis was palpable. One slam on the blackboard in the music suite would instantly command silence from the 70-plus students in class, and that was only in the event that we didn’t quiet down after a request from her.

Ms. Francis instilled in us a readiness to be challenged and perform at any moment. In band, your position or rank in your section could be challenged. If another student believed you were underperforming, you might be called to defend your position by playing a selection on command, flawlessly. This practice fostered a culture of excellence and constant preparedness. We were taught to always be ready for a challenge day in class.

Band wasn’t just a class—it was a home and a place to belong. Students who didn’t fit in elsewhere always found a family in the band. We were taught to look out for one another under the nurturing yet firm guidance of our “Band Mom.” Over the years, many students have shared that being in the band kept them out of trouble and provided a refuge from difficult circumstances.

The personal sacrifices Ms. Francis made are immeasurable. If "giving your all" were a person, it would be Georgia Francis. No dream or endeavor was too big for her to tackle. One such example was her determination to have a Virgin Islands band participate in President Clinton's first inaugural parade.

I vividly remember the day in late November when she announced the invitation to perform in the parade. She explained the cost of the trip—\$600 per student—and assured us that fundraising efforts were in place to help those who couldn't afford it. For me, as a young student passionate about politics, this was a dream come true. I immediately sought out a job that very day, knowing my single mother, working minimum wage, could not afford the trip. The confidence and maturity instilled in me as a band student allowed me to walk into a store, get hired on the spot, and work after school and on weekends to pay my own way. That is the kind of empowerment Ms. Francis gave her students. She treated us as young adults, not children, helping many of us realize our potential.

She taught us that no dream was too big. To this day, I don't know of another teacher who would take over 100 students on a trip. While she had volunteers and chaperones, there was never any doubt about who was in charge.

Band students who didn't have a car always knew that if you asked respectfully, Ms. Francis would give you the key to hers, once you had a license. She had a level of trust in us that some people's own parents did not have in them. The awesome thing about that was Ms. Francis always had a very cool car!

Ms. Francis has the gift of being able to realize potential and identify leadership traits in students and gave them the runway to explore, develop and fulfill that leadership potential. In me, she saw the ability to become the Marching Band's Drum Major in my senior year, a position that one didn't take likely. You see when you respect someone, you will do everything to not let that person down. The respect that I have for who she is has only grown over the years.

I could go on and on with countless stories about this phenomenal Virgin Islander, but in closing, whatever honor we, as a government and community, bestow upon Georgia Francis, it will only scratch the surface of repaying the debt we owe her for all she has done for our islands. Naming the remaining portion of Runner Drive after her is a fitting tribute, ensuring her name serves as a lasting reminder of her outstanding service to our community in perpetuity.