

Good morning distinguished Senators and legislative staff, and members of the listening and viewing audience. Let me begin by thanking Governor Albert Bryan, Lieutenant Governor Tregenza Roach, and their administration for their confidence in me and nominating me for the trial court bench. And thank you to the Legislature of the Virgin Islands for allowing me the opportunity to appear before you today.

BACKGROUND

By way of introduction, my name is Ernest E. Morris, Jr. I am the son of retired Head Start teacher, Shirley Morris, and the late police officer, Ernest “Bones” Morris. I was born and raised here on St. Croix and proudly grew up in Williams Delight. I attended Head Start in Williams Delight, and Kindergarten at the Evelyn M. Williams kindergarten center in Williams Delight. I then attended St. Patrick School where I graduated as Valedictorian, and St. Joseph High School where I also graduated as Valedictorian. I then went on to study at Yale University where I earned two Bachelor of Arts degrees: one in Political Science and one in Spanish. While at Yale, most notably, I was awarded the F. Wilder Bellamy, Jr. Memorial Prize, in my junior year, for being one of the most outstanding members of my class. At graduation I was also awarded the Silliman Cup Award for the senior who contributed the most to the life of Silliman residential college. I completed my education at Howard University School of Law where I earned a Juris Doctor degree. While at Howard, most notably, I was selected for the prestigious Charles Hamilton Houston Moot Court Team, and was awarded the CALI Excellence for the Future Award for excellent achievement in the study of Constitutional Law.

From the time of my admission to the Virgin Islands Bar in 2006, I was an active and contributing member of the Bar Association, with service on the Scholarship Committee, the Public Education and the Law Committee, the Judiciary Committee, the Legislation and Law Reform Committee, the Young Lawyers Committee, the Bylaws Committee, the Awards and Memorials Committee, the Nominating Committee, the Ad Hoc Committee on Indigent Defense, and the Planning Committee for the 2014 Southern Conference of Bar Presidents Meeting on St. Thomas. I served as chairperson of the Moot Court Competition Planning Committee from 2012 to 2018. And from 2009 to 2019, I served continuously as a member of the Board of Governors and was twice elected both Secretary and Treasurer, and also served as President-Elect, President and Immediate Past President. I was awarded the Winston A. Hodge Award, the highest award presented by the

Virgin Islands Bar Association, by my colleagues at the Bar's 2017 annual meeting. Additionally, I volunteered as a member of the District Court of the Virgin Islands' Outreach Committee.

Before my appointment as Magistrate Judge of the Superior Court of the Virgin Islands in 2019, I served as Judicial Law Clerk for the Honorable Edgar D. Ross and the Honorable Julio A. Brady at the Superior Court of the Virgin Islands. I also served as Appellate Law Clerk for the Honorable Maria M. Cabret at the Supreme Court of the Virgin Islands. Subsequently I worked as an advocate for indigent defendants as a Territorial Public Defender. I then worked as Assistant Legal Counsel at the Legislature of the Virgin Islands, as Corporate Counsel for the Innovative and Viya family of companies, and as manager of the Morris Legal Group. In my short stint in private practice, I served on both the District Court of the Virgin Island's CJA Panel and the Superior Court of the Virgin Islands' Indigent Defense Panel. Subsequently, I also served as Chief Legal Counsel of this fine institution.

In November of 2023, I was reappointed by the Judges of the Superior Court to a second 4-year term as Magistrate Judge. I currently serve as the Chairperson of the Superior Court of the Virgin Islands' Bench/Bar Meeting Planning Committee, Secretary of the Standing Committee on Indigent Appointments, and as member of the Judicial Management Advisory Council and the Superior Court's Ad Hoc Committee on Jury Instructions. Additionally, I serve on the Judicial Council of the National Bar Association's Memorial Good and Welfare Committee. I am also Co-Chairperson of the Yale Class of 2000 25th Reunion Planning Committee. I am a member of the Virgin Islands Bar Association, the District Court of the Virgin Islands Bar Association, the American Bar Association, the National Bar Association, the Bar Association for the Judicial Third Circuit, and the Bar Association of the Supreme Court of the United States. I am also a member of the American Judges Association, a lifetime member of the National Conference of Bar Presidents, and a life fellow of the American Bar Foundation.

I am also passionate about contributing to the local community. Prior to taking the bench, I served for four years on the Board of the St. Croix Landmarks Society, and for several years on the St. Croix Committee and the Territorial Committee of the Democratic Party of the Virgin Islands. Prior to taking the bench, I also proudly served as National Committee Man for the Democratic Party of the Virgin Islands. For 20 years, I also served as a recruiter for the Junior Statesmen Summer School. For those who may not be familiar with JSA, the Junior Statesmen Summer School has prepared high school students for responsible leadership in a democratic society since 1934, with month-long programs at top universities like Yale, Princeton, Stanford, and Georgetown.

Preserving Virgin Islands culture is also very important to me. I have been a member of the St. Croix Heritage Dancers, the Aye Aye Cultural Dancers, and I am one of the founding members of the We Deh Yah Cultural Dancers. I served as the President of WDY's executive board for several years, and also served the group in other leadership capacities. One of my greatest joys as a member of the quadrille group is teaching the traditional and official dance of the U.S. Virgin Islands to students in our public schools.

I am committed to being the best jurist that I can be. In furtherance of that goal, I have participated in numerous judicial education courses offered by the National Judicial College. In 2022, I was admitted into the Master of Judicial Studies Program through the National Judicial College and the University of Nevada at Reno. The Judicial Studies Graduate Degree Program at the University of Nevada is uniquely positioned at the forefront of judicial education in our nation. I am on track to complete the Master of Judicial Studies Program later this year.

MAGISTRATE JUDGE DUTIES

As a Magistrate Judge of the Superior Court of the Virgin Islands, my docket includes a wide variety of matters. I preside over Advice of Rights and Arraignment hearings in all criminal matters. I also preside over bench trials in misdemeanor criminal matters where the maximum penalty is less than one year of incarceration. Additionally, I handle small claims, eviction, domestic violence, stalking and harassment, traffic, litter, and probate matters. I also have the pleasure of conducting marriages. During my 4½ year tenure, I have heard more than 546 domestic violence cases, 217 stalking and harassment cases, 297 eviction cases, 472 small claims cases, 118 litter cases, and 110 misdemeanor criminal cases. During that time I have also closed more than 5,780 traffic cases and 305 probate cases. In addition to my assigned duties, I also voluntarily manage a mental health docket and conduct mediations. During my tenure I mediated 66 cases at no cost to the litigants: 29 visitation cases, 13 custody cases, 11 divorce cases, and 13 civil cases.

In the 2023 Report on the State of the Judiciary, Chief Justice Hodge noted that “In Fiscal Year 2023, the clearance rate for the Probate Division of the Superior Court exceeded 100 percent, resulting in an aggregate seven percent reduction in the number of open probate cases...” I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge my role in the significant reduction of probate cases. As of July 12, 2024, thus far in Fiscal Year 2024, I am proud to say that my clearance rate is not just more than 100 percent, it is not just more than 200 percent, but 258 percent. If my appointment is confirmed, I intend

to utilize my case management skills to help reduce the significant backlog of criminal and civil cases on the extensive docket that I will inherit.

TRIAL JUDGE DUTIES

As a Trial Court Judge, my responsibilities will shift to presiding over civil jury and non-jury matters, and criminal matters where the maximum penalty is one year of incarceration or more. My goal as a trial judge mirrors the overall goal of the Judicial Branch as expressed by Chief Justice Hodge in his 2023 State of the Judiciary Address, and that is “not to do the bare minimum needed to meet [my] mandate, but to achieve excellence in every aspect”. As also noted in the report, the Superior Court adopted a differentiated case management system in 2013 which includes aspirational deadlines for case disposition. The Judicial Branch is now in the process of reassessing all case classifications and deadlines to develop a new differentiated system. I believe that stricter monitoring of and adherence to the deadlines that already exist, and as they will be updated, will assist me and my colleagues in reducing and eventually eliminating the backlog of cases. I hope that we will also give consideration to differentiating the case types to which each Judge is assigned. From my perspective, until we dedicate resources specifically to the civil division, like we have done for civil matters that involve complex litigation, it will be very difficult for us to reduce the backlog of civil cases.

In my early years of practice, I was fortunate to observe the skillful manner in which the Honorable Edgar D. Ross moved his cases. He took great pride in always having the highest disposition rate amongst his colleagues. Many referred to his docket at the “rocket docket”. My intention, if my nomination is confirmed, is to bring back the rocket docket. It is often said that “justice delayed is justice denied”. If confirmed, I will strive to eliminate unnecessary and unjustified delays in the administration of justice.

CONCLUSION

Finally, Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor once described a judge’s task in words that are simple and direct: “Be independent, be fair, venture to be wise.” I promise that if my appointment is confirmed, I will continue to strive to do all three. Thank you Madam Chair, and thanks again to the Committee on Rules and Judiciary for the opportunity to provide testimony today. I look forward answering to any questions that you may have, as long as they are questions to which my ethical and professional responsibilities permit me to respond.