

Final Opening Remarks

36th Legislature of the Virgin Islands

Honorable Chair, members of the 36th Legislature, distinguished guests, family, friends, and my fellow Virgin Islanders, good day.

Thank you to this body for this extraordinary honor.

There are recognitions that celebrate what you have accomplished. And then there are recognitions that remind you where it all began.

To be recognized by the very community that raised me, shaped me, challenged me, and gave me the foundation to build the life I have lived is an honor unlike any other.

I am deeply grateful and humbled to be recognized here at home.

My career has taken me around the world. I have lived and worked across continents, helped bring transformative technologies to market, and led global businesses at the forefront of artificial intelligence.

I have sat in rooms I could never have imagined as a little girl growing up in St. Thomas.

And yet, after all those miles, countries, and experiences, I can tell you with absolute conviction:

There is no place like these Virgin Islands.

We are a peculiar people.

Proud. Resilient. Resourceful. Stubborn. Loving.

And, if we are telling the truth, just a little bit nosey.

Growing up in Savan, there was no such thing as doing something without somebody knowing about it.

There were always Savaneros watching, ear hustling, and ready to report to my parents, Karen Hodge and Senator Dwayne DeGraff.

My parents had high expectations, but they certainly had help enforcing them!

Back then, I called it nosiness.

Today, I call it community.

Because underneath that watchful eye was something powerful: a belief that every child belonged to all of us, and their potential was our collective responsibility.

I know this firsthand.

When I was in seventh grade at Addelita Cancryn, I had a math teacher, Ms. Pickering, who saw something in me that I had not yet fully recognized in myself.

One day, she pulled me aside.

She was calm. Respectful. But direct.

She said, "**Rashida, I am disappointed in you.**"

She continued, "You are smart. You have some of the greatest potential I have seen in years. But you need to lead, not follow. Stop looking to others for validation."

And she was right.

At that age, I was more concerned about being liked and having friends than making a difference.

I wanted to fit in when I should have been learning how to stand apart.

But Ms. Pickering saw who I could become.

And she challenged me to see it, too.

That conversation changed my perspective. And that shift made all the difference.

Now, I wish I could tell you that from that day forward, I never made another mistake.

But that would not be true!

What I can tell you is that I was blessed with people who caught me at the right moments.

Mrs. Lisa Forde, who is here with us today. Ms. Louise Tyson, may she rest in peace. Teachers and mentors who saw potential and held me accountable.

And because they did, I learned that **being from a small island never meant I had to have small ambitions.**

I did not leave St. Thomas hoping merely to participate in the world.

I wanted to lead. To solve difficult problems. And to pursue opportunities that stretched me beyond what I knew.

That ambition took me from St. Thomas to North Carolina State University, Duke University and across the world.

Early in my career, I moved to China and later to Slovakia, taking on assignments that challenged me to grow.

At IBM, I helped bring Watson into the commercial world, long before AI became part of our everyday conversations.

And today, at Microsoft, I help lead how some of the world's most advanced AI technologies become meaningful outcomes for businesses.

I am proud of those accomplishments.

But I am even prouder of what they represent.

A little girl from St. Thomas, educated in our public schools, can help shape the future of the world.

And she can do it without abandoning her identity, her values, or the community that made her.

But I also know that I did not get here on hard work alone.

Someone had to open a door.

Someone had to believe in me.

Scholarships helped make my education possible. Mentors invested in me before they knew what I might accomplish.

And above all, I believe God's hand has been on my life, opening doors, placing people in my path, and creating opportunities I could never have imagined.

But with those blessings comes responsibility.

Proverbs 11:25 reminds us:

"A generous person will prosper; whoever refreshes others will be refreshed."

I believe we are blessed so that we can be a blessing to others.

God did not open these doors for me simply so that I could walk through them. He opened them so that I could hold them open for others.

That belief led me to establish the Rashida A. Hodge Scholarship Fund through the Community Foundation of the Virgin Islands, a \$1 million endowment creating a pathway for Virgin Islands public high school graduates to attend my alma mater, North Carolina State University.

The scholarship provides tuition, fees, housing, and mentorship.

Because I know firsthand that access alone is not enough.

Young people need someone who sees their potential, challenges their thinking, and helps them navigate the opportunities before them.

They need their own Ms. Pickering.

Their own Mrs. Forde.

Their own Ms. Tyson.

And this scholarship is my way of helping create those opportunities for the next generation.

But this scholarship is not the culmination of my giving.

It is a beginning.

I believe one becomes two. Two become ten. And ten can become a generation that transforms these islands.

But I cannot do it alone.

And that brings me to the challenge I want to leave with all of us today.

Today, I want to challenge every Virgin Islander who has found success, whether here at home or somewhere around the world to do the same.

Lead.

Don't wait for someone else to invest in our young people.

Don't wait for another program, another initiative, or another person to take responsibility.

If you have the means, fund a scholarship.

If you lead a business, create an internship.

If you have expertise, mentor a student.

If you have relationships, open a door.

And if you have achieved success beyond these shores, find a meaningful way to bring that success back home.

Not everyone can establish a million-dollar scholarship. But everyone can do something.

Imagine if each of us committed to opening just one door for one young Virgin Islander.

One student. One internship. One mentor. One opportunity.

Imagine the collective impact.

Our success must become someone else's opportunity.

And I challenge each of us to make that investment, not someday, but now.

Because our greatest natural resource has never been our beaches, our harbors, or our beautiful landscapes.

It has always been our people.

I want us to build a Virgin Islands where stories like mine are no longer extraordinary because they are rare, but increasingly common because we have invested in making them possible.

So perhaps we should keep a little of that Virgin Islands nosiness after all.

But let's be noseiy about the things that matter.

Which young person needs someone to pull them aside and say, "I see more in you."

Let's make one another's potential our business.

To my parents, family, teachers, mentors, friends, and colleagues, thank you for investing in me, believing in me, and challenging me throughout my life.

To everyone who submitted testimony to this Legislature, your words have moved me deeply. They are treasures I will carry forever.

And to the members of the 36th Legislature, thank you for recognizing my journey.

I accept this honor with humility, gratitude, and an unrelenting sense of responsibility.

I am a daughter of these Virgin Islands, and I carry this place into every room I enter.

But the greatest measure of my life will not be how far I traveled from St. Thomas.

It will be how many people I helped move forward because I came from St. Thomas.

Thank you.