

The Honor of Rashida Hodge: A Daughter of the Soil

Presented by: Dr. Lisa A. Hassell-Forde

**Good Morning to the Honorable Chair, Honorable Senators, Esteemed Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen, and My Fellow Virgin Islanders:**

Today, we gather to celebrate more than an accomplished executive, more than a brilliant engineer, and more than an internationally recognized leader in technology. We gather to honor a woman whose extraordinary journey reminds us that greatness is not determined by the size of the island from which we come, but by the size of our dreams, the strength of our determination, and the depth of our commitment to lifting others as we rise.

Today, we celebrate Rashida A. Hodge — a daughter of the Virgin Islands, a trailblazer in technology, a champion for women, and a shining example of what Virgin Islands excellence looks like on the world stage.

I taught Rashida for Honors English 11 at the Home of the Mighty Chicken Hawks...and she was an exceptional student. I grew to love her as my own; she was and still is one of the more beautiful souls that I have taught and have claimed her as one of my bonus daughters from the 12th grade on. Her parents are well aware that she is mine after theirs. We have remained in contact throughout the years...from 

the classrooms of Charlotte Amalie High School on St. Thomas to the executive leadership of some of the most influential technology corporations in the world, Rashida has demonstrated that a young girl from our beautiful islands can compete, lead, innovate, and excel at the very highest levels of global industry.

Her journey has taken her from the shores of St. Thomas to North Carolina State University, where she earned undergraduate and graduate degrees in industrial engineering, and to Duke University, where she earned her MBA. Her professional achievements include more than two decades of leadership at IBM, where she helped advance the groundbreaking IBM Watson artificial intelligence platform, and executive leadership at Microsoft, where she has helped shape the future of cloud computing and artificial intelligence.

But her story is not simply about corporate titles, professional accomplishments, or international recognition. Her story is about representation. Her story is about opportunity. Her story is about WOMEN. Women who have been told that certain industries are not for them. Women who have entered boardrooms where they were the only woman, the only Black woman, or the only person whose journey began on a small Caribbean island. Women who have had to work twice as hard to be recognized, whose intelligence has been questioned, whose leadership has been underestimated, and whose potential has too often been overlooked.

Rashida has challenged those limitations — not merely through words, but through extraordinary achievement. She has demonstrated that women of color belong not only in the technology industry, but at its highest levels of decision-making. That women belong not only in science laboratories, but in executive offices. That women belong not only at the table, but at the head of the table, helping determine the future of innovation.

And perhaps most importantly, she has shown that when one woman breaks through a barrier, she has the power to open the door for thousands of others. In 2012, she established the Real Hope for NextGen Engineers Endowment at North Carolina State University, helping create educational opportunities for women and underrepresented minorities pursuing engineering careers. She has invested in mentorship, championed diversity in STEM, and demonstrated through her own leadership that excellence and inclusion are not competing priorities — they are powerful partners.

Her commitment to her homeland is equally remarkable. Through her support of STEM educational initiatives in the Virgin Islands, including a \$25,000 contribution to a local summer STEM program, Rashida has helped expose our young people to opportunities in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. And in one of her most extraordinary acts of generosity, she established the \$1 million Rashida A.

Hodge Scholarship Fund through the Community Foundation of the Virgin Islands, creating a pathway for deserving Virgin Islands public school graduates to pursue higher education at North Carolina State University.

Think about what that means.

It means that a young girl sitting in a classroom on St. Thomas, St. John, or St. Croix can dream of becoming an engineer without allowing financial limitations to define her future.

It means that a young Virgin Islander with extraordinary ability, but limited resources, can envision opportunities that once seemed beyond reach.

It means that the doors Rashida walked through are now being held open for those coming behind her.

That is not simply generosity. That is legacy. That is nation-building. That is leadership with purpose. Rashida understands something profoundly important: Talent is universal, but opportunity is not. And she has committed her resources, influence, experience, and leadership to helping close that gap. Her accomplishments have earned her recognition among *Fortune Magazine's 40 Under 40 in Technology*, the NC Tech Woman of the Year Award, and other prestigious

honors. Yet the most meaningful measure of her success may never appear on an award certificate or corporate résumé.

It will be reflected in the young Virgin Islander who becomes the first engineer in her family.

In the young Black woman who enters the field of artificial intelligence because she finally sees someone who looks like her succeeding.

In the aspiring female executive who finds the courage to speak confidently, lead boldly, and refuse to apologize for her ambition.

And in the generations of Virgin Islands children who will grow up knowing that their birthplace is not a limitation — it is a foundation.

This is why Rashida A. Hodge deserves to be honored. This is more than personal achievement. This is extraordinary service, enduring contributions, and a demonstrated commitment to elevating the people and future of these islands.

Rashida has earned that distinction.

She has carried the Virgin Islands proudly onto the international stage. She has shattered barriers in industries where women, particularly Black women, have historically been underrepresented. She has transformed her professional success

into educational opportunity. And she has never forgotten the community that helped shape the woman she has become.

This act of public honor sends a powerful message to every girl educated in the USVI: You are capable. You are brilliant. You are worthy. And there is no ceiling high enough to contain your potential. It would affirm to every woman pursuing leadership that her voice matters, her contributions matter, and her presence at the highest levels of industry is not an exception to be celebrated, but a future to be expected. And it would remind our entire Territory that one of our greatest exports has always been the extraordinary talent, intelligence, courage, and resilience of our people.

Rashida Hodge is not simply a successful woman from the Virgin Islands.

She is a Virgin Islander...who is helping change the world.

So today, let us celebrate her achievements, honor her generosity, recognize her leadership, and acknowledge the doors she continues to open for others.

And today, your Virgin Islands proudly says: We see you. We celebrate you. We honor you. And we thank you.

Thank you, and may God continue to bless Rashida Hodge and the people of these beautiful Virgin Islands we call HOME!