



Testimony from Dee Baecher-Brown, President, Community Foundation of the Virgin Islands (CFVI) in Support of the Resolution Honoring Rashida A. Hodge

Good afternoon, Senate President Potter, and honorable members of the 36th Legislature of the United States Virgin Islands. As President of the Community Foundation of the Virgin Islands, I am deeply honored to provide testimony on behalf of Rashida A. Hodge, to speak in strong support of this resolution honoring Ms. Hodge for her exceptional leadership, professional accomplishments and commitment to the U.S. Virgin Islands.

I know that other testifiers will report on Rashida's extraordinary professional accomplishments. At IBM, she played a key role in the commercialization and global launch of IBM Watson, helping establish the company's leadership in artificial intelligence. Today, she serves as Corporate Vice President, Artificial Intelligence (AI) Business Solutions and Commercial Solution Area at Microsoft, where she leads global efforts focused on helping clients re-imagine their business outcomes with a market-leading portfolio.

I would like to focus CFVI's testimony on another dimension of Rashida: **Rashida, a child of the Virgin Islands.** I first became aware of Rashida Hodge in 2019 through an editorial she wrote about her grandmother Maria Estrill DeGraff, who passed away on March 14, 2019, at the "wisdom-soaked age of 96."

What struck me most was Rashida's reflection that, although her work at IBM has exposed her to some of the world's most extraordinary technological advancements, she would return to St. Thomas whenever she could – drawn home by the opportunity to learn from her grandmother and her family. Rashida understood something profound: **that there is an irreplaceable kind of wisdom that comes from living a long, full life.** Her grandmother's knowledge, perspective, and advice could not be replicated by any technology.

I learned more about Rashida through an "Ode to Calypso," a letter to the editor she wrote in 2020. She described Calypso music as her first touchpoint with speaking truth to power. As a young woman—as "Calypso Rash," her stage name in high school—she was drawn to Calypso's clever sophistication, its satire, politically charged themes, and its ability to make people think.

With the support of Louis Ible Jr., she penned a powerful calypso tune entitled "Black Women Like Me," addressing the hardships endured by enslaved women and the lack of recognition for their extraordinary contributions. Later in 2020, I was formally introduced to Rashida when she provided funding for a CFVI grant supporting science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) programming for students on St. Croix. What began as an introduction has grown into a deeply meaningful relationship-- for CFVI and for me personally.

Rashida's professional life has taken her around the world. She has traveled to 84 countries, meeting with leaders across Africa, Asia, the Middle East, the Far East, South America and Europe. Yet, during the pandemic, when travel came to a standstill and work became "virtual," Rashida made a choice that meant a great deal to us in the Virgin Islands: she chose to work from home – from St. Thomas.

Those months were a gift. They gave me the opportunity to know this remarkable woman not simply as a global business leader, but as a daughter of the Virgin Islands—someone who carries these islands, our people, our history, and our values with her wherever she goes.

In 2021, Rashida accepted an invitation to join the CFVI Board of Directors. As a Board member, she has brought an extraordinary combination of vision, expertise, and commitment. Her knowledge of governance, strategy, technology, and long-term planning has helped guide the Foundation's work. But perhaps most importantly, she has consistently asked us to think bigger about what is possible for the people of the territory.

One of the most powerful examples of Rashida's commitment to the Virgin Islands and to education came in December 2024, when she established the Rashida A. Hodge Scholarship Endowment at CFVI with a transformative \$1 million gift. The scholarship was created to provide Virgin Islands public school students with full tuition, fees, housing, and personal mentorship to attend North Carolina State University - Rashida's alma mater- for up to four years. It is the largest scholarship CFVI has ever awarded. This year, Adaina Smith of St. Croix was selected as the inaugural recipient. But this scholarship is about much more than financial assistance.

The endowment honors Rashida's maternal grandmother, Ioline Hodge, a housekeeper by trade whose legacy of giving and faith helped shape Rashida. In establishing this scholarship, Rashida is once again honoring the people who invested in her – and making sure that other young Virgin Islanders have the opportunity to benefit from that same kind of investment.

There is something deeply beautiful about this.

Rashida was given opportunities. She took those opportunities, worked hard, and achieved extraordinary things. And rather than simply celebrating her own success, she has chosen to reach back and create a pathway for someone else.

That is the kind of legacy that matters.

This scholarship sends an important message to young people across our islands: You can dream big. You can pursue ambitious goals. You can achieve success on a global stage. And you should always celebrate your Virgin Islands' identity.

Rashida has also made clear it that this scholarship is an invitation to all of us. She said:

"Too often, those making significant contributions don't look like me, and I want to change that. This scholarship is not just about funding education; It's about inspiring others to see themselves as contributors and leaders. That is the legacy I hope to build."

I believe that statement captures the essence of Rashida Hodge. She is a global technology leader who is helping to shape the future of artificial intelligence. She is a strategist, a philanthropist, a mentor, and a champion for education. But she is also, and perhaps most importantly for this occasion, a Virgin Islander who has never forgotten where she came from or the people who helped her get where she is today.

Rashida has distinguished herself through extraordinary professional achievement, but her accomplishments are only part of the story. What makes her truly deserving of this recognition is the way she has chosen to use her success—to open doors, expand opportunity, invest in young people, and give back to the Virgin Islands.

On behalf of the Community Foundation of the Virgin Islands, I thank the members of this Legislature for advancing this resolution and for taking the time to recognize Rashida A. Hodge.

Thank you.