

TESTIMONY OF DION G. PARSON

ON BILL NO. 36-0075

BEFORE THE 36TH LEGISLATURE OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS

Good morning, honorable members of the 36th Legislature of the Virgin Islands, and to the listening and viewing audience.

My name is **Dion G. Parson**, and I am truly honored to be here today to testify on **Bill No. 36-0075**, a Resolution honoring and commending **Mr. Austin A. Venzen** for his lifelong dedication to music education and the arts.

I am a music educator, composer, professional musician, percussionist, and mentor, and currently serve as the **Chair of the Communication and Performing Arts Department** at the University of the Virgin Islands.

I was born and raised on the beautiful island of St. Thomas, where I attended Jane E. Tuitt Elementary, Dober Elementary, Wayne Aspinall Jr. High, and Charlotte Amalie High School.

It was at **Wayne Aspinall Jr. High School** during the 1980-1981 school year that I first met Mr. Venzen. He was then the band director at Charlotte Amalie High School, known throughout the territory for being an exceptional educator and a no-nonsense band director.

Mr. Venzen visited Wayne Aspinall to hold auditions for students for the CAHS Concert Band for the upcoming school year. I auditioned on trombone and was accepted. That moment changed my life, because the CAHS Concert Band was the pride of the Virgin Islands, and I was thrilled to be a part of it.

When I entered ninth grade in the fall of 1981, I decided to switch from trombone to drums, which I expressed to Mr. Venzen on the very first day of band class. Let's say—he wasn't pleased. He asked me to step into his office, and we had what I can only describe as a "come-to-Jesus" conversation. He firmly explained why I would *not* be playing drums in his band.

After about ten minutes, I looked him in the eye and said, "If I can't play drums in your band, I'll find another band to play in."

Know the context: Mr. Venzen was known for running one of the most respected, high-achieving music programs in the Virgin Islands. His band was his kingdom, and he was the kind of band director who demanded the very best—musically and personally—from every

student who entered his classroom. So, for a ninth grader—fresh out of junior high—to challenge him and say, "I want to play drums," was *unheard of*. Nobody challenged Mr. Venzen, especially not in front of his band.

He gave me a look that could stop time, then said, "You can't just walk in here and play drums. But he paused, looked me straight in the eye, and said, "Alright then—if you think you're a drummer, you're going to prove it.

You're going to audition—in front of the entire band, right here, right now."

That moment—me standing there as a determined 14-year-old, and him asserting his authority as one of the most respected educators on the island—became a defining one in my life.

Consequently, we walked back into the band room, and he ordered me to play the Virgin Islands March from memory, along with rudiments and scales. When I finished, he turned to the band and announced that I would be the new assistant section leader for percussion.

That day marked the beginning of a lifelong relationship between Mr. Venzen and me, built on respect, challenge, and mentorship.

But we had another challenge for Mr. Venzen during my high-school years. Besides the fact that I became Vice President of the Concert Band and helped Mr. Venzen on various levels within the music program, a group of us asked Mr. Venzen if we could form the **CAHS Jazz Ensemble** as an addition to the exciting music program at CAHS.

He agreed and, along with Cleve Maloon, Kelly Charleswell, Derrick Roebuck, Monet Davis, Galen George, Russell Foy, and others, under Mr. Venzen's guidance, the Jazz Ensemble became one of the most exciting new groups in the Virgin Islands—performing for government events, private functions, and even on cruise ships.

Mr. Venzen, as a music director in general, was known for his demanding rehearsals. When the band started, he'd lock the doors, and we wouldn't leave until the music met his standard. Saturdays often meant additional rehearsals from ten in the morning until he was satisfied. Those were formative experiences that shaped my work ethic forever.

In return, he gave his all, his knowledge, his passion, his devotion, and his guidance on many levels, which made me the educator I am today.

The guidance he gave his students went beyond his classroom setting; community events, community activities, and presenting opportunities were his goals.

In this perspective, at the end of my junior year, Mr. Venzen introduced me to the **McDonald's All-American High School Band** and personally helped me prepare for the audition to ensure I stood a chance. By my senior year, he had moved on to teach at the College of the Virgin Islands (CVI), but thanks to his continuous mentorship towards this application, I was accepted into the **McDonald's All-American High School Band** as the Virgin Islands representative and toured with them throughout my senior year.

Even after he left CAHS, many of us continued playing with him by attending the CVI concert band after school, a testament to the loyalty and inspiration he inspired.

After graduation, while attending Rutgers University, he made sure, when I was home during the breaks, that I would play with his university bands and help train his college students.

Our friendship deepened, and we'd spend nights at his house playing dominoes and cards, talking about life and music. And let me tell you, if you knew Mr. Venzen, you knew he was a *serious* domino player!

Years later, while I was on tour playing drums in Japan, I gazed over the city of Tokyo and suddenly recalled my first day of high school when Mr. Venzen told me I couldn't play the drums. I smiled at the memory. It felt like a full-circle moment reflecting on the beginning of my musical career and, even more importantly, our lifelong friendship that has been the foundation of my career!

Years later, around the time when Mr. Venzen's outstanding and dedicated editions of his 25-year-long run of the UVI Summer Band Program came to an end, he invited me on a **WSTA radio interview** to promote the UVI Summer Band Camp of that year.

Unexpectedly, during one of those rare and deviating moments, Mr. Venzen shared the story that bonded us for life on air—about me challenging him on my first day of high school.

I will never forget this moment, just like the moment in high school, because Mr. Venzen ended the story (and the interview) by saying, *"Dion Parson was the only student I ever bowed down to, and I'm proud of the man and musician he has become!"*

That was one of the most moving moments of my life. Coming from him, it meant everything to me!

Mr. Venzen was a man of integrity, discipline, and deep faith. He was a devoted husband, father, grandfather, educator, and church member. He played tennis, served in the National Guard Band, and poured his energy into the **UVI Summer Music Camp**, helping young musicians find their voice and their purpose.

When I joined the UVI faculty in 2012, he was still teaching, and his mentorship continued. He guided me through the academic world with the same high standards he always carried. Our friendship persisted until his passing in 2020.

In closing, **Austin A. Venzen was one of my musical fathers.**

His influence on me, and on generations of Virgin Islands musicians, cannot be overstated. He taught us discipline, excellence, and love for our craft.

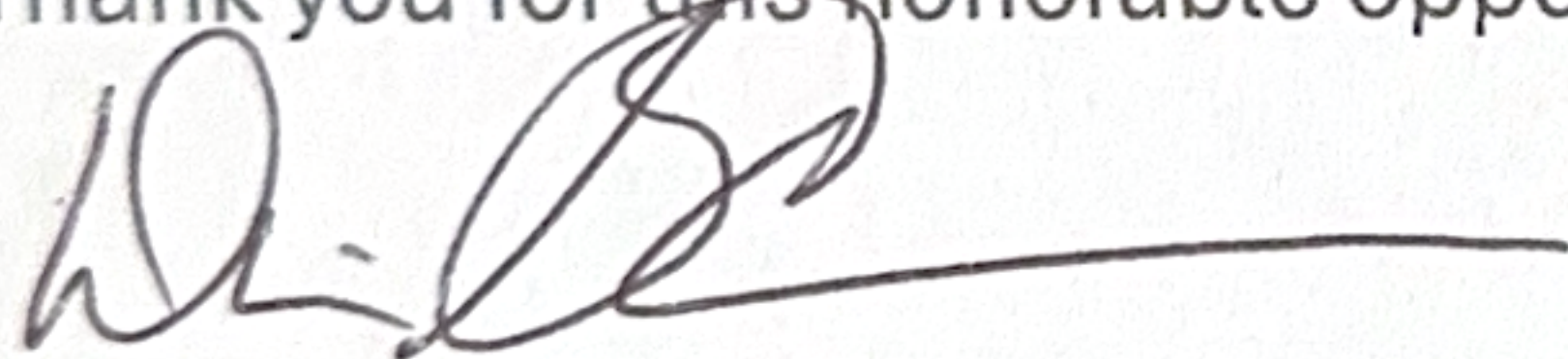
I am a better musician, educator, and human being because of him.

I wholeheartedly support this resolution to honor Mr. Venzen for his unwavering commitment to music education, Virgin Islands culture, and community. I also thank his family for sharing him with us for so many years.

Thank you, Senator Fonseca, and to this honorable body, for recognizing a man whose work continues to resonate in classrooms, concert halls, and hearts across our islands.

It is truly my pleasure to stand in support of this well-deserved honor, and I am available for any questions you may have.

Thank you for this honorable opportunity,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Dion G. Parson', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Dion G. Parson