

Testimony Regarding the Posthumous Honoring of Professor Austin A. Venzen

It's moments like these when you realize that the English language is indeed limited to express the depth of one's feelings toward another. Mr. Venzen, to many, "V" to me, was definitely one of THE MOST influential people in my life. In many ways, I grew up (matured) because of him. He endeared himself to me, a young 14-year-old kid, at the time, and helped me navigate through those turbulent years of adolescence, even when I was too dumb to appreciate his assistance. He taught me how to be selfless yet guarded, direct yet tactful, and aspire for greatness while maintaining humility. I firmly believe that everyone of us is created and placed in the earth to positively impact our environment in all aspects. "V" fulfilled his assignment. Music was the language he spoke. It was the vehicle he used to traverse joy, peace, and hope into the hearts of so many.

I would like to use my time this morning drawing a sketch of Professor Austin A. Venzen that reflects the man and not the educator. Earlier on in his life, he had a fetish for sewing his own clothes. He was this glorified "tailor," like as no one had ever seen before. In his first year at Charlotte Amalie, 1978-1979 school year, beginning in October to be exact, he turned the band room into his personal runway. The tough part about it is that he would let you know that he made the clothes we were looking at. So, I always had the knack, back in the day, for getting in trouble because of my smart mouth. This one day in particular, he came to school in a pair of pink pants with maroon edging around the pockets and down the outer seam of the pants. It was common knowledge that he had recently transferred to C.A.H.S. from the Nazareth High School, as it was called. I thought he was having a bit of nostalgia. In the middle of a quiet moment in band rehearsal I seized the opportunity to remind him that the colors of our school are blue and gold. All I will say is that it was the last time over the next three years that I ever chose to have a non-musical discussion with him in the presence of others. It did not go too well and my comment only encouraged him to sport a steady dose of his iconic clothing line, over what may have been a three-week period. Each entrance into the band room was accompanied with a simultaneous smirk and scowl. He was daring any of us to say a word. Subtly, he was teaching us an aspect of musicianship that we had never considered and that was that good musicianship required creativity. He was direct and yet he had this "figure out what I'm showing you" tendency.

Everything he did always had a reason behind it. Nothing was ever done randomly, nothing. One thing that is common in our DNA, as human beings, is at some point, each of us desires praise for doing good, exceeding expectations, accomplishing feats never achieved prior, and/or being the best at something. Professor Venzen was no different. He appreciated recognition for his hard work, but he did not believe that you should always do things to get your name in neon lights or to be paid. He figured some things should be done from the bottom of the heart so that others could benefit. Case in point: He saw potential in me. He gave me private lessons

for free. He outfitted me not with his clothing line, but with his personal collection of flute resources to further my development, for free. He arranged opportunities for me to participate at events with his trio, without any effort on my part, and made sure I got paid. As I said before, he was a master teacher of subtlety. I had started to become greedy and wanted to know how much we were being paid before I would say if I was available to play. Mind you, I was now 15, and I thought I was on top of the world. One day, he told me that he had arranged for his trio to play at this particular venue and he was bringing me along for the exposure. I asked him how much it was paying. He exhaled slowly and then told me, "Look young man, everything in life is not about dollars and cents. When you learn to give a little, you may just realize that you get far more in return than you anticipated; far more than your required demand." Then, he walked off. I felt a way, but I never asked that question again. However, that teachable moment has stuck with me to this day. Because of that conversation, it prevented me from sinning my soul on many occasions for a dollar and I also learned that there are moments when it is more blessed to give than to receive.

You see, Professor Venzen was not just about developing excellent musicians. He was about molding students with excellent character and discipline. His lessons on discipline included punctuality, attention to detail (play exactly what you see in the music), accountability, and deriving attainable, tangible goals. He knew everyone of his students and everyone he came in contact with might not become a musician, but he was determined that everyone who he came in contact with did not leave the same after interacting with him. One of his greatest attributes was that he was straight down the middle. He was sincere in his intents and expected whoever he allowed into his inner circle to be the same. A spade was a spade with him all of the time.

The mistake many of us make is to judge people by what they do rather than who they are. Music is what he did. Music is what occupied him. However, he was far more than that. He saw untapped potential in the children of the Virgin Islands. He saw experiences that we lacked, and he desired so desperately to have us experience them, without leaving the island. Performing a halftime show, creating a pep band, having a 100-piece marching band, and being a composer of our own music gave him great joy. He was about more though. He expected us to respect our elders, do well in our academic classes, and he wanted to see his students doing something meaningful with their lives, post high school and the collegiate experience. He actually had a serious conversation with me once, near the end of my senior year, where his sole intent was to discourage me from majoring in music. He told me that I was academically inclined to do something that would possibly be more lucrative. He was pushing me in the direction to pursue a law degree. I was adamant that music was what I thrived in, expressed myself the best with, and felt the greatest connection toward. Eventually, he relented, but it made me appreciate him more, for in that one moment I realized that he was genuinely concerned with my well-being rather than bragging and saying he taught me everything I know. He would have been right up to that point for saying so.

Professor Austin A. Venzen transcended music. "V" taught me, and others, to consider others above self, the importance of family, the necessity of being good and responsible citizens in our community, and most of all, the importance of being true to self. Through our conversations, especially some of the last ones we had, he proved that there are still trustworthy, decent, thoughtful, and loving people in this world who are willing to share themselves with you for your good; for in so doing, they fulfill the divine purpose of their existence.

My testimony is lengthy, I know. Please forgive me, but it is necessary that I make this last point. This recognition today is a tremendous undertaking that I wish he could have experienced in his lifetime. On March 3, 2020, two days before he left the island for the final time, he said to me, "Levi, no one knows all that I have done. I feel like people have overlooked me to honor others. It's not that I don't think that they don't deserve their day in the sun, but I feel like I have been taken for granted." I had to stop and tell him that there is nothing that he did that can ever, or has ever, or will ever be taken for granted. I told him those who know him, know his worth. Again, I missed it. I did not realize that he, in that moment was giving me a glimpse into his thoughts as he considered his mortality, an end that was two months and ten days away. Then he said to me, "Always appreciate time because you do not realize how much of it you have wasted away until you are out of time." I had no comment, but it is one that I rehearse in my head over and over, and over. As stoic as he could be, this moment right here would have touched his soft spot. He could be a difficult read at times, but trust you me, he had a soft spot. Today, this committee has hit the bull's eye.

Yes, "V" is no longer physically with us, but the light of his being here continues to shine through the lives of the many he touched, such as mine. If we continue as he demonstrated to us, a part of him will live on in this earth forever.