

TESTIMONY OF SONIA L. BOYCE IN SUPPORT OF BILL NO. 36-0319 HONORING AND COMMENDING RENA BRODHURST

Good day, Honorable Members of the Thirty-Sixth Legislature of the Virgin Islands, members of the Committee, fellow testifiers, members of the listening and viewing audience, and most importantly, Rena Brodhurst and her family.

I regret that I am unable to be present today and respectfully ask that my testimony be read into the record in support of Bill No. 36-0319 honoring and commending Rena Brodhurst.

So much has already been written and said about Rena's accomplishments that I decided not to repeat her résumé. Instead, I want to speak about the Rena I came to know and why, nearly ten years ago, I described her as someone who "kept people connected."

I remember the first time I met Rena at a community planning event. I had heard her name for years and knew of the St. Croix Avis and her many accomplishments, so I had somehow imagined someone much older.

Instead, I found myself sitting beside this relatively young woman, and we struck up the most delightful conversation. She left a very good first impression on me, and that impression stayed.

As I came to know her better, I saw someone generous, direct, funny, private, compassionate, principled and fearless. What stood out most was her focus.

When Rena believed something mattered, she committed herself to it. Obstacles, criticism and challenges did not easily move her from what she believed needed to be done. I often marveled at how she carried herself through both trials and triumphs. She has a warrior spirit, not one that needs to announce itself, but one that stands firm, takes the hit, gets back up and keeps going.

In 2016, when the Rotary Club of St. Croix honored Rena as its first Woman of Distinction, I described her as someone who "kept people connected." Today, those words carry even greater meaning for me.

For many Virgin Islanders, the St. Croix Avis was not simply a newspaper. It was a staple in our homes. I especially remember the Sunday/Monday editions. Beginning the week with the Avis helped us understand what had happened, what was coming, what government was doing, what was happening with elections, which community events were ahead, who had passed, and what issues people were discussing.

In many ways, it helped us prepare for the week ahead. That is what I meant when I said Rena kept us connected. The Avis connected us to information, government, community life and the wider world. It documented hurricanes and their devastating aftermath. It reported election information, government decisions, resources, celebrations, deaths, public concerns and the ordinary happenings that together told the story of the Virgin Islands.

Sometimes the news made us proud. Sometimes it was painful. Sometimes it revealed things we would rather not have confronted. That, too, was part of its responsibility.

Rena did not seem particularly concerned about titles or status when accountability was required. If something needed to be addressed, she addressed it.

I respected that about her.

My observation was that she gave people an opportunity to tell their side, presented the information, and trusted the public to form its own judgment. She took seriously the responsibility of getting the story right.

The legislation recognizes her commitment to freedom of the press and the fearless editorial voice associated with the St. Croix Avis.

What also impresses me is the responsibility she accepted at such a young age. At only 25, Rena assumed leadership of an institution already woven into Virgin Islands history. This was more than a job. It was responsibility, legacy, and family. It became a deeply personal commitment to succeed in a field that was demanding, unforgiving and constantly changing. She accepted a challenge many would not have been willing, or able to carry and met it with determination, courage and resolve.

Her example also spoke powerfully to women.

Whether she intended to become an example or not, she became one. To me, she showed that you do not give up simply because the odds appear to be stacked against you. You learn. You adjust. You stand your ground when necessary. And you continue the work.

She also created opportunities for others, including Eunice Bedminster, whose appointment as managing editor is recognized in the bill.

But Rena's impact extended beyond journalism. She did not use the Avis only to tell us what was happening. She also used the institution to help people.

The bill documents her support for literacy, including providing newspapers to Golden Grove for literacy projects, along with her support for vulnerable residents, youth activities and community causes.

Her concern for the community did not end when the newspaper went to press. She also cared deeply about culture.

Her involvement in reviving the Foreday Morning Serenade and her work connected with the Crucian Rican Ole Time Breakfast and Tramp reflected a genuine commitment to Crucian culture, history and customs.

Culture does not preserve itself. Traditions survive because someone cares enough to carry them forward. Rena cared.

Then came January 2024. When the St. Croix Avis printed its final edition, we lost more than a newspaper. We lost a hub.

We lost an institution that had spent generations telling our stories through the lens of people who lived here and understood this community.

The legislation recognizes that final edition as the conclusion of a 180-year era.

I believe many of us only fully understood what the Avis had meant after it was gone. Its pages reflected Virgin Islands life back to us. At times it celebrated us. At times it challenged us. Sometimes it exposed our flaws, differences and problems. But it was ours. It told our stories. Those stories now form part of the historical record of these islands.

That may ultimately be one of Rena's greatest contributions.

What is news today becomes history tomorrow. A story someone hurried to read on a Monday morning may one day help a student, historian, researcher, family member or future Virgin Islander understand who we were and what we experienced.

The bill recognizes Rena's contribution to preserving the historical and cultural narrative of the Virgin Islands.

So I ask: How many stories about Virgin Islands families, institutions, communities, governments, celebrations, struggles and triumphs might have disappeared had someone not taken the time to document them?

Rena took the time. For nearly four decades under her leadership, the Avis helped this community remain in conversation with itself.

That is a legacy I hope younger Virgin Islanders come to understand. They should know that people came before them and created pathways that make it possible today to tell their own stories, build businesses, create media platforms, challenge institutions and sit at tables where important decisions are made.

But opportunity also carries responsibility. Integrity matters. Honesty matters. Respect matters. Preparation matters. Consistency matters. Accountability matters. Rena's life reflects those values.

And so, Rena, I return to the words I used almost ten years ago. I said you kept people connected. I meant it then. I understand it even more now. You helped keep us connected to information, government, culture, history and, most importantly, to one another.

There is something especially meaningful about honoring someone while she is still here to hear her community say: We saw you. We saw the work. We saw the sacrifices. We saw the difficult days. We saw the victories.

And we remember.

Rena, thank you for preserving our stories, helping us stay connected, and giving so much of yourself to the United States Virgin Islands.

I respectfully offer my support for Bill No. 36-0319 and for this recognition of Rena Brodhurst and her remarkable contribution to the people, culture and history of the Virgin Islands.

Sonia L. Boyce