

Testimony of Aquannette Y. Chinnery before the Committee on Government Operations & Consumer Protection of the 34<sup>th</sup> Legislature of the Virgin Islands on April 9, 2021 regarding Bill No. 34-0019

TESTIMONY:

Good morning to the Honorable Carla J. Joseph, Chair of the Committee on Government Operations & Consumer Protection; the Honorable Donna Frett-Gregory, President of the 34<sup>th</sup> Legislature and sponsor of the bill, other Senators present, other invited testifiers, family and friends, and all others present or viewing.

I am Aquannette Chinnery, and I am the proud mother of Lt. Ronaqua A. Russell. It is my honor to appear today before this body to give testimony in support of the resolution honoring my daughter and respectfully request that the members of this committee give it favorable consideration. I believe that this type of recognition not only honors the person, but by extension the person's family and the village who raised the person. Other young Virgin Islanders may also be inspired by seeing one of their peers receiving such an honor.

In 1992, I was a single mom and made the sacrifice of leaving my children Ronaqua and Kamali back home in the Virgin Islands with my parents Arthur and Annette Chinnery for three years so that I could attend law school in order to make a better life for me and my children. My parents continued to play a role in helping to raise them throughout their childhood, particularly with Ronaqua. I am forever grateful for the close relationship that she developed with them.

Ronaqua has always been very resilient and is able to shift course to overcome challenges and to take advantage of opportunities. God truly has blessed her and seemingly puts her in the right place at the right time. She remains humble no matter what award or accolades she has

received. She knows that me and my mom will always let everyone know about her latest accomplishments.

We always knew that whatever career path Ronaqua chose, she would be successful. Since childhood, she has shown great determination and a willingness to work hard to achieve her goals. When she was young, my brother-in-law, who was a commercial airline pilot, asked what she wanted to be when she grew up and she said that she wanted to be a flight attendant. He suggested that she had the qualities to become a pilot. That belief in her and recognition of her special qualities from someone who was in that field sparked her interest in becoming a pilot. We never know what we say to young people that may change their lives as that conversation did with her life.

Ronaqua also showed leadership skills from a young age, including during her time as a member of the Civil Air Patrol. It was with them that she experienced the excitement of steering the plane during a discovery flight.

Her path to the U.S. Coast Guard began because of her singing ability when she sang at a destination wedding for two Coast Guard pilots who were graduates of the U.S. Coast Guard Academy. The bride and groom suggested that she apply to the U.S. Coast Guard Academy to further her dreams of becoming a pilot. We hadn't even been aware of the Academy at the time. That meeting set her on the course that would eventually lead to her graduating from the U.S. Coast Guard Academy and later, after completing the challenging Naval Aviator training, to become a Coast Guard airplane pilot.

Ronaqua has continued to progress in her aviation career and became an Aircraft Commander in February 2018, a position which gives her great responsibility over both a plane

worth tens of millions of dollars and the crew and copilot during their missions. External recognition outside of the Coast Guard continues and she was honored in 2019 by a Florida-based organization Operation SAFEE Flight (Showcasing Aviation for Empowering Education), she received the 2020 Air Wisconsin ATP/CTP scholarship, and earlier this year the Miami International Airport recognized her contributions to aviation in the South Florida area by listing her as a local aviation leader and prominently displaying that accolade and her photo on a billboard at the entrance to the airport as well as elsewhere publishing about accomplishments.

We are so proud of the recognition that the Coast Guard has given her as she continues to serve her country. Not only was she the first African American female in the Coast Guard to be awarded the Air Medal, in 2019 her alma mater, the U.S. Coast Guard Academy honored her by inducting her into the Wall of Gallantry in the Hall of Heroes. If you visit the U.S. Coast Guard Academy, you will see the plaque honoring her prominently displayed on the Wall of Gallantry. It is a very special recognition that not many have achieved.

In addition to her current duties with the Coast Guard as Safety Officer and as a pilot, she is currently working on her Master of Science in Project Management from Florida Institute of Technology. She continues to make her family and the many Virgin Islanders proud and we look forward to continuing to be amazed by this awesome and remarkable woman. I am proud to call her both my daughter and my friend. Thank you for considering her for this honor.