

# Voices of the USVI: Dialogue & Discovery



MARCH 19-20  
University of the  
Virgin Islands

# Mission of Community Foundation of the Virgin Islands

To be a catalyst for positive change and enrich the quality of life in the Virgin Islands while preserving our islands' unique cultural heritage by inspiring philanthropy, strengthening nonprofits, and engaging the community. We do this by connecting people and resources with community needs.

## About the Humanities Council of the Virgin Islands

In October 2023, CFVI was invited by the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) to submit a non-competitive proposal to serve as the U.S. Virgin Islands' official humanities council. In August 2024, NEH confirmed CFVI's appointment—the first new permanent council in the network since 1994. CFVI now receives general operating support from NEH and joins 56 humanities councils nationwide, delivering programs and resources across the U.S. and its jurisdictions.

# By the People: Conversations Beyond 250

Voices of the USVI is a two-day, in-person convening that brings together humanities organizations, artists, culture bearers, and community leaders from across the Virgin Islands for collaboration, learning, and cultural exchange. The program includes a public keynote, a youth-elder dialogue circle, and interactive sessions that amplify intergenerational voices and preserve these conversations for the Smithsonian's archives.

## Program Goals

- Encourage cross-island partnerships and intergenerational exchange.
- Highlight expressive culture and humanities-based programming in the USVI.
- Provide capacity-building and resource-sharing opportunities.
- Create space for networking and idea incubation.
- Facilitate public and intergenerational engagement in humanities dialogue through an open keynote and youth-elder dialogue circle.

In Collaboration With



**By the People:** *Conversations Beyond 250* is a series of community-driven programs created by humanities councils in collaboration with local partners. The initiative was developed by the Federation of State Humanities Councils and the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage.



Hosted By

# Program Overview

## Day 1: Remembering & Harmonizing Together

8:00 - 9:30 AM	Registration & Breakfast
9:30 - 10:00 AM	Welcome & Opening Remarks - <i>Dee Brown</i>
10:00 - 10:30 AM	Opening Keynote Address - <i>UVI President, Dr. Safiyah George</i>
10:35 - 11:00 AM	Digital Strategies & Discussion - <i>Dr. Chenzira Davis Kahina</i>
11:00 - 11:05 AM	Break
11:05 AM - 12:10 PM	Youth Elder Panel Discussion and Q&A - <i>Molly Perry</i>
12:10 - 1:15 PM	Lunch
1:15 - 2:45 PM	Interactive Genealogy Workshop - <i>Sophia Aubin</i>
2:45 - 3:00 PM	Break
3:00 - 4:30 PM	Networking Session - <i>Dr. Chinue Uecker</i>

## Day 2: Moving & Growing Together

8:00 - 9:00 AM	Breakfast & Morning Gathering
9:00 - 9:45 AM	Dance Movement Lab - <i>Dr. Elle Nielsen</i>
9:45 - 10:00 AM	Break
10:00 - 10:45 AM	Neighborhoods and Community Building Panel Discussion - <i>Nadine Marchena Kean</i>
10:45 - 11:00 AM	Break
11:00 AM - 12:00 PM	Festival Design - <i>Stephanie Chalana Brown</i>
12:00 - 1:00 PM	Lunch
1:00 - 1:45 PM	Foodways - <i>Chef Ashley Allen, Sr.</i>
1:45 - 2:00 PM	Break
2:00 - 2:45 PM	Agriculture Roundtable - <i>Dr. Olasssee Davis</i>
2:45 - 3:00 PM	Break
3:00 - 4:00 PM	Closing Ceremony - <i>Dr. Chinue Uecker</i>

# Guest Speakers



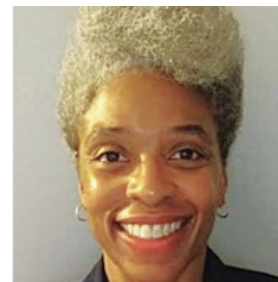
**WELCOME & OPENING REMARKS**  
**Dee Baecher-Brown, President**  
**Community Foundation of the**  
**Virgin Islands**

Dee Baecher-Brown has served as President of the Community Foundation of the Virgin Islands (CFVI) since April 1996, working closely with local and national donors, businesses, and nonprofits to address critical issues affecting the Territory. Her leadership prioritizes programs that enhance quality of life across the U.S. Virgin Islands, with particular focus on the most vulnerable residents. Under Dee's tenure, CFVI has provided more than \$52 million in grants, scholarships, and services, grown its assets from an initial \$540,000 to more than \$18 million, and built the largest philanthropic donor network in the Territory through the CFVI Angels program. Dee serves on several professional and civic boards, including the USVI Governor's Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy Committee and the University of the Virgin Islands Presidential Advisory Council. She holds an MBA from Johns Hopkins University and has extensive experience in youth development, education, and nonprofit leadership.



**OPENING KEYNOTE ADDRESS**  
**Dr. Safiya George, President**  
**University of the Virgin Islands**

Dr. George is the sixth President and a proud alumna of the University of the Virgin Islands, where she was also a student-athlete. She previously served as the Holli Rockwell Trubinsky Eminent Dean, Professor, and Helen K. Persson Eminent Scholar at Florida Atlantic University's Christine E. Lynn College of Nursing and as Chief Executive of FAU's Memory and Wellness Center and Community Health Centers. Dr. George has held academic leadership and research roles at Emory University and the University of Alabama and completed a postdoctoral fellowship at Duke University, with graduate degrees from Emory and undergraduate degrees from UVI. A widely published scholar, her research spans HIV/AIDS and infectious diseases to the use of artificial intelligence in modeling outcomes for COVID-19 and Alzheimer's Disease, and she is a Fellow of multiple national professional academies.



**FACILITATOR**  
**Dr. Chinue Uecker, DBA/MBB**  
**University of the Virgin Islands**

Chinue Uecker, DBA, MBB, is a seasoned leader in process improvement, project management, strategy, and education with experience at GE Healthcare and Abbott Laboratories. She has driven global initiatives that improved operations, reduced costs by \$7.5 million, and secured \$1.5 million in grants to build nonprofit capacity. A Master Black Belt, Chinue also teaches at the Jack Welch Management Institute and African Leadership University while mentoring future leaders worldwide. Dedicated to service, she chairs the Boys and Girls Club of St. Thomas/St. John and contributes as a reviewer and volunteer in multiple organizations.

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## Digital Strategies & Discussion

10:35 - 11:00am



**DR. CHENZIRA DAVIS KAHINA** Dr. Chenzira Davis Kahina, respectfully known as “Dr. Chen” is a distinguished interdisciplinary scholar and a visionary leader in the fields of culture, heritage, arts, technology, and spirituality. With a career spanning over four decades, she has established herself as a leading expert in cultural heritage research, communication technology, and transformational education. Dr. Davis Kahina is recognized for her trademark framework of #actionabledeliverables, which empowers and collaboratively supports communities toward sustainable development. An esteemed educator, global culture ambassador, and published author, Dr. Davis Kahina holds academic credentials and fellowship awards from prestigious institutions including Rutgers University, Pepperdine University, the University of California, San Diego, and others. Dr. Davis Kahina currently serves as the inaugural Director of the Virgin Islands Caribbean Cultural Center and an Adjunct Professor at the University of the Virgin Islands. Dr. Davis Kahina’s work is strengthened and illuminated by her multidimensional experiences as an eclectic wisdom trailblazer, creative producer, ordained priestess, and natural wellness specialist. Her lifelong commitment to cultural sustainability and the universal Afrakan Caribbean Indigenous humanities is reflected in her lived practice of #RemainInspired.

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## Youth Elder Panel Discussion

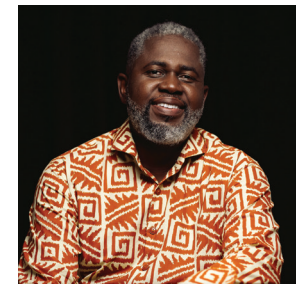
11:05am - 12:10pm



**MS. DARA MONIFA COOPER** Dara M. Cooper leverages over 20 years of expertise in agricultural communications to translate complex technical research into accessible formats that support local farmers, food entrepreneurs, and culture bearers in the Virgin Islands. Her commitment to cultural and linguistic preservation includes documenting local idioms, dialects, and

agricultural expressions that allow community members to “name the world” through their own cultural perspectives while safeguarding traditional knowledge connected to farming and foodways. As Founding Director of Sankofa Saturdays and a UVI Student Government Association Black Heritage Committee Advisor over the past two decades, she integrates multimedia storytelling, cultural education, and agricultural advocacy to cooperatively preserve the linguistic and heritage traditions of the Virgin Islands sustainably for future generations.

**GYLCHRIS SPRAVUE** is a Virgin Islander with deep family roots dating back to 1713. Born in Puerto Rico, and raised in the US and British Virgin Islands, he has been an ardent supporter and advocate for arts and the humanities in the VI-Puerto Rico region. Two of his greatest passions are music and languages. He is a tenor, pianist, vocal coach, organist, composer, musicologist and the Artistic/Musical Director of the Virgin Islands - Puerto Rico Friendship Chamber Orchestra. Mr. Sprauve is fluent in English, Virgin Islands English Creole, Spanish, Brazilian Portuguese, Italian, and proficient in French. He also speaks Virgin Islands Dutch Creole, a language he acquired through contact with his uncle, UVI Professor Emeritus Gilbert A. Sprauve, PhD. Currently, Mr. Sprauve is involved in the process of launching the Virgin Islands Dutch Creole project, an initiative to assist the people of the Virgin Islands in reclaiming this key part of their linguistic cultural heritage.





**DEMI TRIMM** Born and raised on St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands, Demi is deeply committed to community service and youth empowerment. She is a first-year graduate student at the University of the Virgin Islands in the MA degree program. Currently serves as the Grants and Program Associate with the Community Foundation of the Virgin Islands (CFVI), where she supports grant management,

and program coordination. Demi Trimm aspires to continue making an impact as a mentor, educator, and community leader to empower and foster positive change.

**DR. MOLLY PERRY** Molly Perry is an Associate Professor of History and Geography and Social Sciences Department Chair at the University of the Virgin Islands. At UVI, Molly teaches courses on Caribbean history and geography applying an interdisciplinary approach to encourage student research on central issues of the region’s development and people over time.



Thanks to grant support from the Community Foundation of the Virgin Islands, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and National Science Foundation she implemented community-based experiential learning throughout the Social Science Curriculum. She has developed a grant-funded Oral History project placing her undergraduate students in the vital role of preserving and promoting the Virgin Islands unique history, cultures, and languages.

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## Interactive Genealogy Workshop

1:15 - 2:45pm



**SOPHIA AUBIN** Sophia Aubin has served as the president of the Caribbean Genealogy Library since 2014 and is recognized for her leadership in initiatives that promote and encourage engagement with history, culture and genealogy. She has been instrumental in launching an oral history project at the library, in digitization efforts, and in the creation of classroom activities for

K-12 related to Virgin Islands history. Currently she is collaborating on a 2-year project with the University of Copenhagen and the Danish National Archives, titled “Mapping Freedom”. It will combine historical research methods with modern data science techniques to reconstruct family relationships of individuals who lived in the Danish West Indies from 1841 to 1917.

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## Dance Movement Lab

9:00 - 9:45

**DR. ELLE NIELSEN** Dr. Elle A. “Ellarina” Nielsen was born and raised on the beautiful island of St. Croix, USVI. A former Miss St. Croix Queen 2016-2017, she is an outgoing, goal-oriented woman pursuing her dream as a professional dancer with a focus on choreography and being an ambassador for academic excellence within the performing arts realm. Elle began her dancing career at the age of three, continuously growing as a dancer under the direction of some of St. Croix’s finest dance teachers.



Currently, she is the professor of dance at the University of the Virgin Islands for the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences, a fitness instructor, and a freelance choreographer and performer.

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## Neighborhoods and Community Building Panel Discussion



10:00 - 10:45

**NADINE MARCHENA KEAN** Nadine Marchena Kean, an eighth generation Virgin Islander, is a student of the history, culture and heritage of the Territory she calls home. She has led interactive workshops for those studying their family roots and is currently an instructor of history and culture for the University of the Virgin Islands' CELL

program. Nadine has served as a tour guide for the reenactment of the St. Thomas Coal Workers' Strike, the historic walk discussing the St. Thomas Women's Suffrage Movement and continues to offer genealogical & historic based walking tours. She has been invited to speak at conferences in Europe, the Caribbean and throughout the United States. Mrs. Marchena Kean has also published a book called *The Ties that Bind... A Virgin Islands Story*, where she presents documentation to support oral histories told to her over the years.

### **DR. RUBY SIMMONDS-ESANNASON**

Dr. Ruby Simmonds Esannason, a native Virgin Islander and lifelong educator, has devoted her life to education, public service, and genealogy. A graduate of Charlotte Amalie High School, she earned degrees from Augustana College, Cheyney State College, and Clark Atlanta University. She served as an English



teacher, Senator in the Legislature of the Virgin Islands, delegate and Vice President of the Fourth Constitutional Convention, Deputy Commissioner and later Commissioner of Education, and Director of Employment Security. She also became Associate Professor of English and held leadership roles at the University of the Virgin Islands. Active in community and cultural organizations, she is a member of the Virgin Islands Genealogical Society and the Caribbean Genealogy Library and serves as a tour guide for the annual "Dollar fo' Dollar" Cultural Tour. Her interest in genealogy began more than fifty years ago and expanded to include the Esannason family line after meeting her husband, Rubio Esannason. She continues to research her family's roots while enjoying music and time with her family.

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## Festival Design

11:00 - 12:00 pm



**STEPHANIE CHALANA BROWN** Stephanie Chalana Brown is a Virgin Islands visual historian, costume designer, and cultural leader whose work centers expressive culture as scholarship in practice. Her research explores how colonial histories shaped Caribbean identity and how Virgin Islanders reinterpret those legacies through cloth, architecture, ceremony, and festival arts.

As Director of the award-winning Sanctuary Festival Troupe, she reimagines traditional masquerade through innovative, research-driven costume design. She also founded Keeping Masquerading Traditions Alive, an intergenerational apprenticeship program, and leads the resurgence of Virgin Islands madras through her E<sup>3</sup> framework: Exploration, Evolution, Effectuate.

Brown's scholarship extends to built heritage through *Claiming Spaces: The African Story of the Sugar Mill*. As Director of the Division of Virgin Islands Cultural Education, she advances territory-wide programming that preserves and celebrates Virgin Islands traditions with rigor and creativity.

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## Foodways

1:00 - 1:45 pm



**CHEF ASHLEY ALLEN SENIOR'S** journey in hospitality began at 13, not because he dreamed of being a chef, but because he was a kid searching for safety during one of the darkest moments of his life after Hurricane Hugo. The kitchen became the first place where Chef Allen felt structure, purpose, and worth—"things I didn't know I needed until they saved me." Every station Chef Allen worked, from washing dishes in his grandmother's restaurant to becoming one of the youngest sous chefs on island, taught him discipline, humility, and the power of being given a chance. Today, Chef Allen cooks and mentors with one mission: to give the next generation the same lifeline that once pulled him out of chaos and turned his pain into purpose.

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## Agricultural Roundtable

2:45 - 3:00 pm



**DR. OLASSEE DAVIS** Olassee Davis is a native Virgin Islander, environmental activist, ecologist, ethnobotanist, and cultural historian. He serves as Extension Professor and Specialist in Natural and Cultural Resources at the University of the Virgin Islands, St. Croix, teaching courses on the islands' history, culture, and natural resources.

A prolific writer, Davis has published thousands of articles on environmental, agricultural, historical, and social issues, and his work has appeared in over 70 local, national, and international publications. He is founder of the St. Croix Hiking Association and serves on several nonprofit boards, including the Virgin Islands Urban and Community Forestry Council and the Virgin Islands Trail Alliance.

Davis has lectured widely across the Caribbean and the Americas on heritage tourism, eco-tourism, medicinal plants, sustainable agriculture, and Virgin Islands cultural and natural heritage. His advocacy has been instrumental in protecting land, historic sites, and natural resources throughout the Virgin Islands. He has received more than 300 awards, including "Environmentalist of the Year" and the EPA Environmental Quality Award.



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