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Executive Director Robert Graham Remarks

Louis E. Brown Villas – III Ribbon-Cutting
June 23rd, 2020

Three years ago on August 24, 2017, we gathered here to celebrate a ground breaking while construction was underway.

On September 5th we advertised the opening of a waiting list inviting families to live here.

Two days later, an uninvited visitor named Irma came calling--a Category 5 hurricane. Ten days after that came her sister Maria – another Category 5 storm.

Together these forces of nature destroyed everything in their path --- including this project under construction. Now here we are, cutting the ribbon on the third and final phase of what our board of commissioners envisioned eight years ago ... as a better way for families to live.

To our elected officials, partners, and the residents of St. Croix: Good morning, welcome, and thank you for staying the course. No wind, no rain or hurricane could stop us from transforming the very old public housing that stood here since 1970, with the beautiful community you see today. To change from the public housing we are familiar with to this wonderful place is literally a once in a lifetime opportunity for the families who will call this place home.



Today we celebrate a new beginning for them and their children as they grow to become the future leaders of tomorrow; just as we acknowledge the original 440 units of Louis E. Brown and the families who launched their offspring to meet the challenges of that day.

Now as then, when faced with formidable challenges, the people of the Virgin Islands stand together, stronger, more resilient and we rebuild better than ever.

Rebuild we must ... not only from hurricanes and pandemics, but from structural inequalities ... in education, in healthcare, and yes, in housing; inequalities that have clung to us from Louis E. Brown's day, to his granddaughter Stephanie Brown's, who honors us today with her presence.

Stephanie's grandfather, Louis E., was an infant when the United States purchased the Territory. As a young sergeant major returning from World War II, he became intimately familiar with Mr. Jim Crow and segregation. The inequities of his day propelled him to become a progressive politician, dedicating his life to evening the playing field for Virgin Islanders. Of the many hats Mr. Brown wore, one of them was mine – housing authority director -- from 1954 to 1965.

There was no Civil Rights or Fair Housing Act in that day to help people of color access the tools of prosperity, and public housing segregated them further by poverty as well as race. Over 1,000 people lived literally on top of one another in the first Louis E. Brown buildings, isolated from their fellow Crucians, with no amenities of their own.

Today, after 50 years of so-called progress, the wealth gap between black and white Americans is greater than ever, and home ownership for people of color is at its lowest point. We will work to change this by building better housing.

In the words of Bishop William Barber, "We must remove the knee of oppression off of the throat of our democracy so it can breathe."



Thank you all for doing your part ... for creating a smaller, amenity-rich, hurricane-safe, energy efficient and affordable community where families can breathe. Every resident deserves the quality of housing you see before you. Our Board of Commissioners envisions housing as infrastructure; a foundation that nurtures families and communities to grow and reach their potential.

Just so you know, the Board is really getting warmed up with transforming the old public housing inventory. With the support of Governor Bryan, the Housing Authority will continue to revitalize affordable housing across the Territory. Our goal is to replace or renovate at least 15 affordable communities on St. Croix over the next 10 years.

We could not produce affordable housing to this high standard without the support of many partners.

At this time, I would like to recognize the Housing Authority's leadership, Chair, Dr. Noreen Michael: Vice-Chair, Mr. Vaughn Hewett, Comm. Kaye Gumbs, Comm. Simba Abiff, Comm. Kimberly Causey-Gomez, and Comm. Daryl Griffith. Thank you all for your guidance and good stewardship.

Today we acknowledge Executive Director Daryl Griffith of the VIHFA. This much needed housing is possible through this partnership and its financing through the low-income housing tax credit program. This program gives us the engine to drive our aggressive plan to rebuild the Territory's public housing.

With us today on Facebook Live are our local partners from HUD who provide technical assistance and expedited approvals for our projects. From the Public Housing Field Office in Puerto Rico, Mr. Antonio Cardova is a good man to have your back in a storm ... or two. His team includes Domingo Garcia, who shares our belief in quality housing for all. Together they keep us moving and on mission.



As a federally funded agency, we depend on our Delegate to Congress, the Honorable Stacey Plaskett, to advocate for the resources our Territory needs. Madam Delegate, thank you for your constant hard work.

We are also blessed to have with us the Honorable Marvin Blyden who chairs our elected officials on the Legislature's Housing Committee. Senator Blyden, thank you and your committee for your continued support.

To the members of the Louis E. Brown family, thank you for allowing us to continue to honor the man and his legacy. To Stephanie Brown, thank you for sharing your grandfather's passion for equality. We look forward to you continuing his advocacy.

Finally, to our builders. Although we have worked with several firms on the three phases of this community, the seamless, attractive architecture you see is the work of a very experienced developer, McCormack Baron Salazar. It reflects the value that we place on lifting the spirits of our families with superior design. The team included McCormack's President Vince Bennett and Vice President Sandra Seal, together with our building contractor, James Bennett of J Benton Construction. Thank you, all, for creating housing that will contribute to Crucian pride and well-being for the generation to come.

No appreciation would be complete without recognizing the person who makes this beautiful housing possible, our Chief Operating Officer, Lydia Pelle. Lydia, please accept our thanks for your focus and determination to deliver this community to the families of St. Croix.

In closing, if I could channel the late Louis E. Brown, I think he would say to our newest residents, "Welcome home, people. Be joyful and prosper." And to our Governor, thank you for supporting this new community and the rebuilding to come. Know that we appreciate your progressive vision to improve the lives of Virgin Islanders, and we are with you 150 percent ... uplifting their housing and spirits with developments like Louis E. Brown Villas -- III.

