



### *Nature's Little Secrets*

**Feliza Fenty**

**Virgin Gorda, British Virgin Islands**

Growing up on the little island of Virgin Gorda in the British Virgin Islands (BVI), Feliza Fenty saw how people around the world loved to visit her homeland. Sometimes called "Nature's Little Secrets," the BVI's 60 islands, with their gentle trade winds are the sailing mecca of the Caribbean. With its rich ecosystem of coral reefs and abundance of little fishes, tourists enjoy discovering their magical world by snorkeling there. Tourism from its five-star resorts, high-end villas, and luxury yachts represents over 40 percent of the BVI's income, with an equal amount of revenue coming from offshore financial services.

Like many others who wanted better opportunities for their children, Feliza's parents had moved from Barbados to Virgin Gorda. They were well-educated, they found good jobs, and became leaders of their church and in their community. They made a good life for their family, living in a modest middle-class home next to Handsome Bay. Feliza loved walking on the beach with her father, collecting colorful conch shells and watching sea creatures scurrying across the sand.

Feliza's parents had instilled in her the importance of getting a good education. Always planning ahead, they made sure she had dual citizenship. While she was in labor, Feliza's mother journeyed by ferry to the hospital in the U.S. Virgin Islands capitol of St. Thomas to give birth there, so that one day her little girl would have the option to attend university in the United States.

The British Virgin Islands are a gateway for all British-owned Caribbean islands. It is a stepping stone "across the pond" for those who aspire to go to university and pursue a professional life in the islands' mother country of the United Kingdom. Feliza grew up with children from Dominica, Jamaica, Guyana, Antigua, Barbuda, and the British West Indies who made up the diverse Virgin Gorda community of 4,000 people. In Virgin Gorda, everyone knows everyone else. Feliza had seen how the less well-educated parents of some of her classmates travelled to work from their homes in tin-roofed shacks on primitive scooters, wearing the crisp uniforms required for their jobs serving tourists.

From an early age, Feliza wanted to find a way to help more young people strive for a better future. She was troubled by what she saw around her—the vast inequity of wealth, and the lack of opportunities for local children. So, when she was 16 and she heard about a new youth leadership program that was going to be offered on Virgin, she jumped at the chance. She was fascinated to learn about how young people on the nearby island of Vieques, Puerto Rico had created the Stone Soup Leadership Institute's first Sustainability Summit and, following that, the Vieques Youth Leadership Initiative. "If they can do it, so can we!" she thought.

She invited some of her friends to join her for a meeting at the Road Town Café, where The Institute's team started the meeting with a question for them: "What is your dream for your life, for your island, and for the world?" she said. She loved hearing her friends share their dreams with each other. "Just imagine if we could make them happen!" she said.

Feliza has always had a gift for communication, and for bringing people together. She was eager to share her friends' dreams with adults, especially with the government leaders on BVI's capitol island of Tortola, who she felt could be more supportive of too-often-marginalized Virgin Gorda's youth. In order to be taken seriously, Feliza decided that first her group needed a name and a mission statement; *then* they could ask for letters of support from community leaders. And that is how the Virgin Gorda Youth Leadership Initiative (VGYLI) was born.

Feliza was happy that at the VGYLI meetings, The Institute's team actually listened to young people, and asked them what was important to *them*. Too often in patriarchal societies, children are expected to be “seen and not heard.” But VGYLI youth had some good ideas for how their community could be better, and now they had a chance to put their ideas into action by organizing community service projects.

Feliza began to imagine herself as a TV journalist, and decided she wanted to create a VGYLI video. She thought it would be a good way to get the message across. So she found a filmmaker, picked out background music, decided on a location, created a script, rehearsed her voiceover message, and then cajoled her friends into sharing their dreams on camera. And she invited local business leaders, like the Bitter End Yacht Club owner, Dana Hokin, to talk about the importance of training and hiring young people to work in the tourist industry on camera too.

When the film was finished, it was a hit! Everyone loved it.

At one of their meetings, VGYLI youth watched an eye-opening movie by former U.S. Vice President Al Gore, *An Inconvenient Truth*. Everyone was shocked to discover just how fragile their island—and our whole planet—really are to climate change. They began talking among themselves, seeing things differently, and putting two and two together. They began thinking about why it was, for example, that it was always 10 degrees hotter on Virgin Gorda than on the neighboring islands. They could see that their daily lives were already being affected by climate change. For example, with very little rainfall, Virgin Gorda had had to create the first desalination plant in the BVI, just so everyone could have enough drinking water. And because it has very few trees to serve as a coastal barrier, their island was very vulnerable to hurricanes.

Felicia was concerned. Now that she'd seen the “inconvenient” truth, she wanted everyone else to see it too. She knew that nothing would change until people got together to make a change. She created a survey and shared it with her community – asking people if they'd heard of climate change and if they knew what was happening to their environment. She was even more worried when she found that of the 80 people she surveyed, only a few had even heard of climate change. So she wrote a report and featured it on VGYLI's website. “While the truth is inconvenient, we must each do our part,” she said. “Before you throw that soda can in the road, think twice. We can be a shining example.”

Once they'd seen the movie, VGYLI youth were curious to learn more about their island. Thanks to a generous charter boat owner, they had the opportunity of a lifetime when he invited them to go on an Environmental Stewards Sustainability Tour. Like most Caribbean youth, they didn't even know how to swim! And they'd never been snorkeling. The experience was incredibly exciting for them. “When I jumped off the boat, I had to overcome my fears of heights - and be adventurous,” one of them said. Another said, “I was so scared, but then I realized, I can do it! And then I had fun.” These future youth leaders were thrilled to see all the magical creatures who lived under the sea – right in their very own backyard! *So this is why all the tourists come to visit!* they realized.

During the trip, the captain shared with the young people the harsh reality of how these precious coral reefs were dying from uneducated boaters who had anchorage habits. To make things worse, in 2005, rising sea temperatures had bleached the coral reefs. This experience left a lasting impression on Feliza. “Knowledge is power,” she thought. And then, “Knowing, seeing, believing – knowing is seeing, and seeing is believing!”

Eager to learn more, in 2007 the VGYLI youth created the first Sustainability Summit to be held on Virgin Gorda. Hosted by the Bitter End Yacht Club, Virgin Gorda youth learned from the Vieques youth leaders who shared their sustainability initiatives, as well as local business leaders, who challenged them to study hard and pursue their dreams.

Feliza's next adventure was to travel to St. Lucia to be a youth delegate at the Caribbean Media Exchange (CMEx) Conference on Sustainable Tourism. There she learned from government leaders about innovative sustainability practices that were being introduced on neighboring islands. And, emboldened by the enthusiasm that her video had met with so far, she presented it at the next CMEx Conference in San Juan, Puerto Rico.

Upon graduation from high school, Feliza decided to go to college in the United States at Texas Christian University to study journalism. Whenever she went home for a visit, everyone looked to her for leadership, and she always encouraged them to do better with their lives. And while many of the BVI's best and brightest leave for college and then

stay away, where there are more career opportunities, Feliza was determined to return to Virgin Gorda after graduating from college.

Putting her communications skills to work, she began as an information officer at the BVI's Ministry of Natural Resources and Labour. Sargassum—a floating seaweed that suffocates small ocean creatures was invading the BVI's beautiful beaches—and it had a putrid smell! The Handsome Bay beach near Feliza's family home was covered with it! She wrote a report on the sargassum invasion for the BVI Conservation and Fisheries Department, and harkening back to her earlier years, she also took a lead role in preparing a report assessing BVI's ability to cope with a mass casualty event. It turned out to be a warning of things to come.

Working alongside BVI's Minister of Natural Resources and Labour, Dr. Pickering, next Feliza used her organizing and communication skills to shepherd what would become the Climate Change Trust Fund, the first financing framework in the Caribbean for climate change issues. This positioned the BVI as a leader among small island states globally in establishing the policy and financing framework needed to address the causes and impacts of climate change. But unfortunately, when the government changed hands, the project was shelved - just at the worst possible moment.

When Hurricane Irma hit in 2018, it devastated many Caribbean islands. Virgin Gorda was in the eye of the storm. With its few trees, the little island was demolished, and life changed forever. The precious coral reefs were decimated. Sargassum invaded the island, and then mosquito-borne illnesses. Feliza, like many others, contracted the life-threatening dengue fever, with its long-lasting symptoms. The impact of climate change was so sudden and dramatic, it turned life upside down for everyone. Then, just as Virgin Gorda was starting to slowly rebuild, the COVID pandemic hit, crippling the island's economic base. Feliza, like many others, lost her job.

In times of great challenges, Feliza has learned to be resilient and adapt to the new reality of life on her island. Now the proud mother of four-year old Ifunaya, Feliza is using her organizing and communication skills once again - this time to rally Virgin Gorda's women to create healthier, better lives for their families. She has launched her new company, UPLIFT as a self-improvement training development to help women balance their personal and professional lives, as well as the lives of their communities. "What does it mean to be a Black Caribbean millennial in today's world?" is the question she is asking members of her community now. "How can we be resilient and take care of ourselves and prepare for our children's future?"

Feliza has always been ahead of her time. One wonders what might have happened if Virgin Gorda's leaders had listened to Feliza the other young people. Maybe they would have been better prepared to deal with climate changes. It's never too late!

When Feliza accepted the Tortola Rotaract Club Award as the Young Professional Public Relations Officer of the Year, she challenged the organization to also bring Rotaract to Virgin Gorda, which they did; and she now proudly serves as a charter member. When asked what advice she has for youth, she says, "Don't allow yourself to be overwhelmed by circumstances. When I first left high school, I never imagined that someone like me would get to go away and study something so fun, interesting, and worthwhile." She adds, "I want the future youth of our territory to always put their best foot forward in whatever jobs they may have. Build a reputation of responsibility and reliability. Make it so that if there is anything people can say about you it is that *you always do the very best you can.*"

*You must never be fearful about what you are doing when it is right.*

Rosa Parks

**Call to Action:** Learn more about Virgin Gorda Youth Leadership Initiative: [www.vgyl.org](http://www.vgyl.org) and Feliza's project: [www.preetbird.com](http://www.preetbird.com)

Stone Soup Leadership Institute  
[www.stonesoupleadership.org](http://www.stonesoupleadership.org)  
[www.soup4youngworld.com](http://www.soup4youngworld.com)