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Equine Therapy and Vocational Training Coming to St. Croix's Correctional Facility

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On Thursday morning at the Golden Grove Correctional Facility on St. Croix, partners for an organization named The Elite Program held a groundbreaking ceremony for a vocational rehabilitation program geared toward giving incarcerated women and men marketable job skills for gainful employment, as well as the benefits of equine therapy through structured training for the care of retired racehorses.

Governor Albert Bryan, who attended the groundbreaking, fully endorsed The Elite Program, a partnership between the USVI Bureau of Corrections on St. Croix, The USVI Equestrian Equine Therapy Project, Inc. (EETP), and Yepsen and Pikulski, LLC.

Why horses? “Horses seek trust and safety in the humans who care for them,” said Dr. Donald Pomeranz, a St. Thomas dentist and co-founder of EETP.

A program of this caliber is not only of benefit to the rehabilitation of inmates, but also at-risk youths, recovering addicts, and others who experience post-traumatic stress disorder or PTSD. Working with horses, according to Mr. Pomeranz, will develop in its caregivers a sense of well-being, calmness, self-confidence for leadership, and overall peace and harmony.

Bureau of Corrections Director Wynn Testamark said that her team is eager to move forward with this new initiative to help empower inmates prior to their reintroduction into society, so they can be better citizens of the Virgin Islands. Released prisoners can then go on to utilize their advanced skills and reputable qualifications as they pursue jobs at therapeutic riding programs of all levels or as veterinary assistants, said Mr. Pomeranz.

“They need a second chance. They need to not have their backs turned on,” EETP founder Carolyn Smith said of inmates during an interview with the Consortium. Raised on the island of St. Thomas, her love and concern for horses grew after seeing so many abandoned following the 2017 hurricanes. She then bore witness to The Elite Program’s success at an all-women’s correctional facility in Ocala, Florida. Ever determined, Ms. Smith then said, “We have to do this in the V.I.”

Currently, the Golden Grove Correctional Facility has a farm of animals cared for by inmates. Stephan Hyacinth, an inmate who was present at the groundbreaking, shared that he learned much about different animal personality traits and characteristics while caring for and observing the cows, sheep, and pigs on facility grounds. The cows, he said, are getting more acclimated to his daily care, as they now eat mangos straight from his hand.

“Sometimes the animals are more afraid of you,” Mr. Hyacinth expressed. “They’re very smart too. Some of them come back at the same time each day,” he said referring to the animals often returning from grazing without his guidance.

Governor Bryan threw his support behind the effort with the hopes that it can be duplicated to serve at-risk youth and dent the school-to-prison pipeline.

“People need to have something to look forward to,” the governor said. Whether they are inside or outside the prison system, Mr. Bryan believes people will put in the work toward things they are interested in. As he observed, Virgin Islanders love horses. “It’s something that’s just endemic in the culture,” said the governor.

According to Mr. Bryan, the initial asking amount to fund the start-up of this program was \$30,000; however, the governor said he plans on securing \$500,000 in federal Department of Interior grants along with other local funding sources.

The USVI EETP is launching a capital and annual fund campaign for local support to ensure that the program serves as a successful model that will provide sustainable results for future generations.