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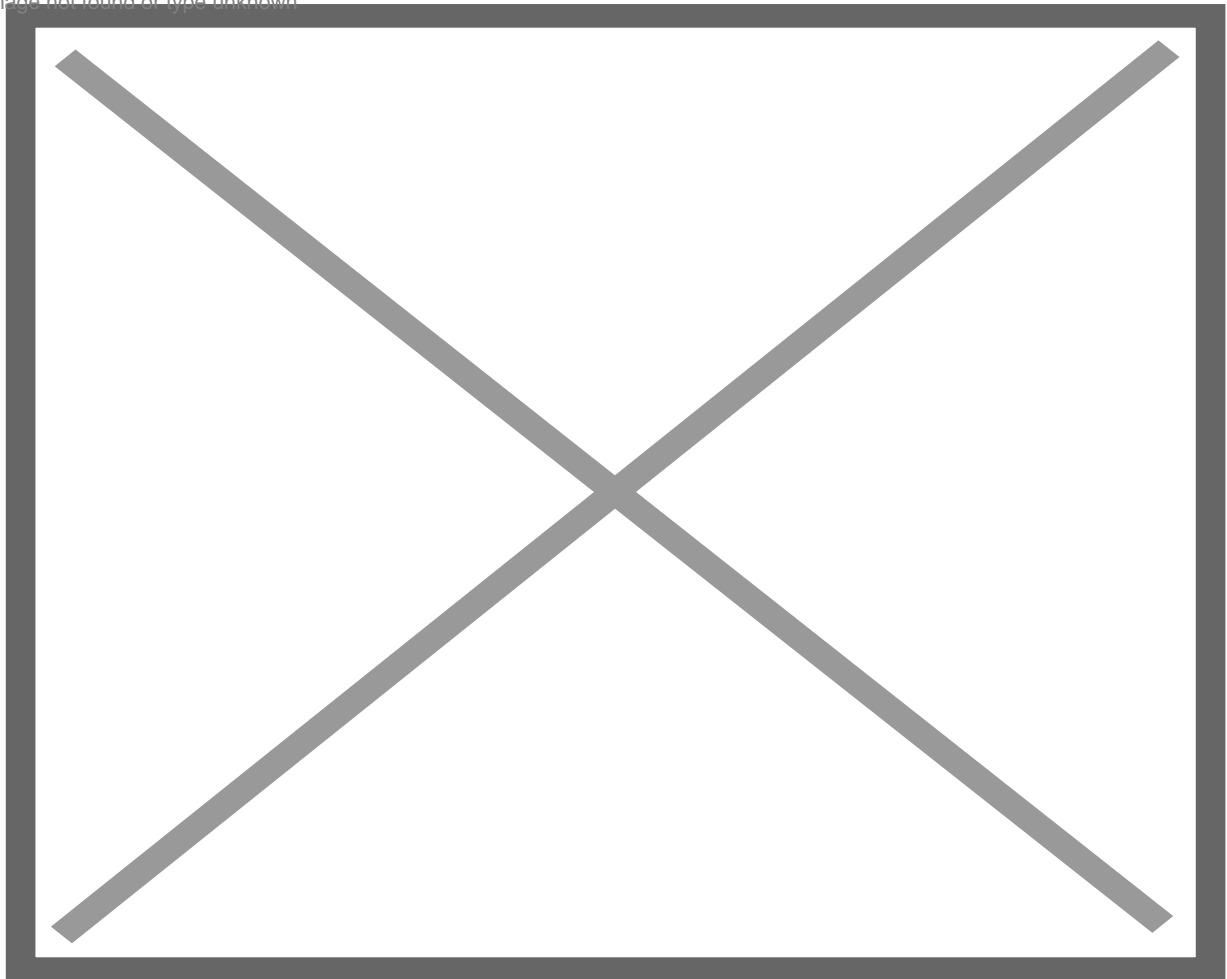
Alayah Watley, Khari Newton and Marley Robinson Crowned Crucian Christmas Festival Royalty

**Zy'Naii Prentice continues reign as Crucian Christmas Festival
Princess for additional year**

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From left to right, Jr. Miss Crucian Christmas Festival Alayah Watley, Princess Zy'Naii Prentice, Duchess Marley Robinson, and Duke Khari Newton. By. D.E.A.R. PRODUCTIONS/VICONSORTIUM/DIV. OF FESTIVALS

Festival Village officially roared to life on Tuesday in an extravaganza of sound, light and color, as several young Crucians were crowned carnival royalty - Prince, Princess, Duchess, Duke and Jr. Miss.

The evening kicked off with contestants immediately launching into their introductory speeches, followed by the question and answer segment. Two Jr. Miss contestants – Jayla Newton and Alayah Watley – sought to impress the judges with their poise, grace, eloquence, and ability to speak spontaneously in response to a question. Ms. Newton, age 17, told the audience that she believed her generation’s greatest challenge was technology. “Why? Because bullying on technology is a major thing that causes people to have depression and anxiety.” For her part, Ms. Watley said that she believed violence was the greatest challenge to her generation.

Next up were the Duke contestants. Five-year old Khari Newton said that his favorite teacher at the Eulalie Rivera Elementary School was one who gives him snacks. Meanwhile, Ray Anthony Brown, who attends the Claude O. Markoe Elementary School, said that his favorite teacher gives him hard work, which he appreciated because it would mean higher grades.

Duchess Contestant Marley Robinson loves her teacher at the Ricardo Richards Elementary School because she is helpful. Meanwhile, 7-year old Re’khia Peterson appreciated her teacher for her nice attitude. Jaelyn Rodriguez, Duchess contestant number three, picked her old Kindergarten teacher at the St. Patrick’s Catholic School as her favorite, because “she always used to teach us lots of stuff.”

After the speaking segments, the audience was treated to a musical interlude featuring Avery, a young talented vocalist who regaled patrons with a seasonal number, as well as musical powerhouse Juego, who wowed with his signature high-energy performance.

The swimsuit segment was a tightly regulated one, with rules for attire meant to protect the young Jr. Miss contestants. All swimwear was required to be in one piece, with full coverage, and without the inclusion of any cut-outs, fringe, or other elements that could be deemed risqué. Ms. Newton’s sparkly tangerine and fuschia suit was meant to represent sunset over the Virgin Islands, with an added detachable ruffle signifying the movement of the clouds in the sky and the waves in the ocean. Ms. Watley’s suit was a fiery red underneath a color-blocked coverup that featured the Virgin Islands eagle crest in the center.

All contestants participated in the “fun fashion” segment, where they had the opportunity to show school pride by dressing up in the colors of their official school fabric and represent the assigned theme - “favorite character” for Duke and Duchess contenders, and “old Hollywood” for the Jr. Miss contestants.

Khari Newton wowed as “Super Khari”, a local superhero fighting to keep Crucian culture alive, while Ray Anthony Brown portrayed “Go Ray Ray Go”, taking the audience on a tour of various aspects of school culture - athletics, academics, and agriculture. Duchess contestant Marley Robinson was a Red Riding Hood clad in her school’s red check material, a crown of roses adorning her head, shedding layers of clothing to reveal her final outfit of shorts and a skirted bodice. Fellow contestant Re’khia Peterson portrayed Gracie of Gracie’s Corner, dressed in the familiar plaid of Ms. Peterson’s alma mater, accented with red and yellow fabrics. Her outfit also transformed to reveal a white jumpsuit underneath. Meanwhile, Jaelyn Rodriguez decided to channel a Tahitian princess, initially wrapped in a green Polynesian print fabric robe that transformed into a sparkly green jumpsuit with trailing sleeves.

Jr. Miss contestants were equally as dazzling in their fun fashion ensembles. Jaeyla Newton began in a white satin robe with padded shoulders, trimmed in her school’s blue and cream plaid. Underneath, her white bodycon dress was accentuated by ruffled shoulders and a ruffled bustle in the same plaid, showing hints of yellow on the reverse side. Meanwhile, Alayah Watley wore the

same school colors, but her ensemble was a yellow jumpsuit accented with pearls and rhinestones, topped with a satin cape with the blue plaid peeking out from the reverse side.

The Jr. Miss platform presentations were an opportunity for the young contestants to speak on a matter close to their hearts. Ms Newton's endeavor is the "Safe Space Project", which would make available friendly mentors to provide guidance and support to students. She envisioned social emotional workshops where "we learn to step into each other's shoes", and where "empathy becomes a language that breaks barriers and builds bridges." Key components of the project as described by Ms. Newton is a facility that responds to text messages with the address of a safe play site closest to the sender, as well as a podcast that provides a platform for young Virgin Islanders to share their dreams, fears and joys.

Ms. Watley's platform focused on the creation of "Read Between the Signs", an American Sign Language club designed to help high schoolers understand the world of those who are Hard of Hearing or completely deaf. The club, said Ms. Watley, "will not only enhance and enrich our educational experience, but is intended to boost our cognitive ability." Weekly meetings would focus on learning ASL alphabets and phrases, and the club would host silent outings from time to time, meant to encourage enthusiasm for learning ASL. Ms. Watley hopes that some of her peers would eventually become motivated, through the club, to become ASL interpreters, a skillset she says is badly needed in society.

Following the cultural wear segments and a raft of musical entertainment numbers, the judges were ready to crown the winners, announced to adoring shouts from the audience. St. Croix Festival Duke 2023 was captured by Khari Newton, while the 2023 Duchess title was awarded to Marley Robinson. The St. Croix Jr. Miss pageant winner for 2023 was Alayah Watley.

Each winner will receive prizes of cash and other gifts which will be distributed throughout the year of their reign.

According to Deputy Commissioner of Tourism Shamari Haynes, who was on hand to pick one of Tuesday night's raffle winners, the Duke, Duchess, & Jr. Miss pageant was "a great opportunity for us to make the festival village the epicenter of the Crucian Christmas Festival and all of the events." He says he is looking forward to the hosting of more events in Festival Villages to come.