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Local Students Debate Politics and Meet Influential Leaders at Junior State of America Winter Congress Convention

Education / **Published On February 21, 2020 08:10 AM /**

Staff Consortium **February 21, 2020**

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USVI Best Speaker Award recipients Finn Sharpless of Antilles School, and Jonathan Gomez of All Saints Cathedral School. By. JSA

A delegation of sixteen Virgin Islands high school students recently attended the Junior State of America's (JSA) Winter Congress Convention in Washington, DC, and brought home three coveted Best Speaker Gavels, a release issued Thursday has made known. The group spent five days in the nation's capital, where they debated dozens of student-drafted bills during a mock-legislative session, visited cultural landmarks, and met with influential political leaders including Delegate to Stacey Plaskett, House Majority Whip James Clyburn, and Douglas Domenech, assistant secretary for Insular Areas at the Department of the Interior.

Jonathan Gomez of All Saints School; Kashish Chainani, Anika Hahnfeld, Aisha Khemani, Aishwarya Nagpal, Sakshi Parwani, Araba Penn, Karina Sakhrani, Finn Sharpless and Eesha Ved of Antilles School; Yuanelis Baez, Ishara Jendayi, Dasmine Maynard, and Raequan Victorine of Charlotte Amalie High School; Anthony Mardenborough, Jr. of St. Croix Educational Complex, and Makeda Nash of St. Joseph High School, represented the territory at the convention, which was held from February 7-9.

The V.I. group participated with over 700 students hailing from high schools in Florida, Georgia, Texas, New York, Connecticut, and Massachusetts. The trip was organized by Marc Stridiron, long-time coordinator of Junior Statesmen's programs in the Virgin Islands. JSA parent Rafael Llanos, Jr. chaperoned the DC trip for the eighth year, along with JSA alumnae Sumaiyah-Nadira Richardson and Jonelle-Alexis Jackson.

(Below, USVI Junior Statesmen Students meet with Assistant Secretary Douglas Domenech at the Office of Insular Affairs, Department of the Interior. Credit: JSA)



The delegation received a generous contribution from the Ritz-Carlton Hotel, which covered half of the trip's cost. The Antilles School JSA Chapter spearheaded the fundraising efforts.

Winter Congress is a student-run legislative simulation where students adopt the roles of senators and representatives and work to pass bills they wrote and submitted prior to the convention. The convention is designed to develop students' public speaking, advocacy, and leadership skills. A team of JSA student leaders reviewed hundreds of submissions and selected 90 bills for debate at the convention. On Saturday, students participated in committee hearings where legislation was presented, debated and marked up. Bills were amended and language was clarified as students lobbied feverishly to secure the votes to pass their legislation out of committee and on to Sunday's full Senate and House sessions for further debate. Only 15-20 bills earn final passage at each Congress convention.

Three of the V.I. delegation's bills were debated at the conference, with two bills passing through their committee hearings. The third, the "Territories' Rights Amendment", also passed Sunday's full Senate and House sessions. The Territories' Rights Amendment sought to amend the Constitution to allow federal voting rights for residents of the Virgin Islands and the other U.S. territories. The legislation was written by Makeda Nash, Aishwarya Nagpal, and Karina Sakhrani, with Jonathan Gomez and Finn Sharpless joining as co-sponsors.

Jonathan Gomez (All Saints School, 12th Grade) and Finn Sharpless (Antilles School, 11th Grade) were two of twenty students voted Best Speaker by their fellow committee members. Mr. Sharpless also accomplished the rare feat of winning gavels for both his performance in Saturday's committee hearings and Sunday's full house and senate sessions.

Trip coordinator Marc Stridiron was pleased with the VI delegation's results. "We couldn't be happier with the group and how well they performed in Washington," Stridiron said. "We're obviously very proud of Finn and Jonathan for their well-deserved best speaker gavels, but everyone on the team did a fantastic job all weekend. We say Winter Congress is the hardest 'field trip' you can find, and as always, the students were up to the challenge."

Before the convention, the students spent two full days exploring the nation's capital and meeting with influential policy makers. On Thursday, the group visited the offices of FreedomWorks, a leading conservative Think Tank and grassroots lobbying organization. There, the students discussed political strategy, policy issues, and the role of social media in politics with senior members of FreedomWorks' policy and communications teams.

The students then traveled to Capitol Hill for a meeting with Virgin Islands Delegate to Congress Stacey Plaskett and House Majority Whip James Clyburn of South Carolina at Mr. Clyburn's offices in the Capitol. The students discussed Congressman Clyburn's long career in politics, his leadership role in the House and his efforts to build consensus on key policy initiatives.

Congresswoman Plaskett discussed her legislative agenda, disaster recovery funding, and the recently concluded impeachment trial among other topics, in a wide-ranging Q&A with the students.

On Friday, the students visited the Department of the Interior and met with the leaders of the Office of Insular Affairs, including Assistant Secretary Douglas Domenech, Policy Director Basil Ottley, and Federal Policy Specialist Dwayne Petersen.

In addition to their meetings, students visited a number of DC landmarks, including the National Museum of African American History and Culture, the Library of Congress, the United States Holocaust Memorial, the Capitol Visitor Center, the Smithsonian American Art Museum, the National Portrait Gallery, and the U.S. Botanic Garden.

Since 1934, the nonprofit, nonpartisan Junior State of America program has educated and prepared high school students to be active and responsible citizens, voters and leaders. JSA Virgin Islands is presently seeking to establish more school-based chapters in the territory's high schools and raise awareness of the program. For more than 25 years, Virgin Islands students have participated in the Junior Statesmen Summer School programs, which are held at Stanford University and Georgetown University. At these programs, participants learn statesmanship, cultivate leadership skills and broaden their perspective on political issues. JSA Virgin Islands' receives donations for Winter Congress and Summer School. The group is actively seeking donations to assist students who will be attending the upcoming summer programs. For more information on the Junior Statesmen program, please contact Marc Stridiron at (340) 344-2434 or jsavirginislands@gmail.com.

