

High School Girls Propose Solutions to Social Challenges at UVI Leadership Conference

UVI competition encourages young women to apply leadership skills to real-world problems

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For the second year, the University of the Virgin Islands College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences hosted the “Young Ladies Learning to Lead” Conference and Competition, which according to UVI is aimed at “bringing girls together to acquire new knowledge and skills relative to personal and professional development, as well as to provide them an opportunity to learn and demonstrate leadership skills.

Participants were female high school students from schools across the territory, who first participated in a conference prior to the competitive part of the activity. During the collaborative session, the girls were able to work on developing self-esteem, empathy, and demonstrating

authenticity. They learned about various leadership styles, how to build relationships, how to effectively work in teams, and how to effectively speak in public. Students were also given training in preparing for their academic journey beyond high school.

After the conference at the end of February, the girls then had about a month to prepare for the competitive portion of the event. They were tasked with “using the knowledge and skills that they had acquired to implement an idea that would address a social problem...that impacts the Virgin Islands territory,” according to Anna Clarke, chair of the event committee. Their chosen topic had to be something that is widely seen to be a social problem in the community, having received some type of public outcry.

Additional requirements were that the problem had to be solvable using strategies that harnessed the skills of the contestants or the collective efforts of VI residents. Solutions presented should not include the expectation of assistance from any government entity, and the problems chosen must be ones that can be addressed with measurable goals towards a viable solution.

On March 27, competition day, the girls went before a panel of three judges to present their problems and solutions. Savanna Holley of the Good Hope Country Day School was ultimately adjudged the winner, with her presentation on how to solve the issue of youth apathy towards the environment.

Ms. Holley first identified several serious environmental problems in the territory, including a proliferation of single-use plastics including the ubiquitous protective film covering styrofoam trays of fruits and/or vegetables seen in supermarkets everywhere. Waste management is also a major issue, one which Ms. Holley illustrated with photos of overflowing bin sites at key locations in the territory. Contributing to the problem is the lack of convenient recycling options, Ms. Holley argued. The inexorable march of climate change is another environmental problem not receiving due attention from the territory’s youth, she said.

Reasons for such apathy among her peers, Ms. Holley said, was due to a number of factors, including lack of interest, limited access to knowledge, and lack of funding, among others. She believes that these deficiencies can be tackled using a holistic approach, with tactics that include requiring community service, engaging youth in solution-oriented discussions, more education being provided through clubs and through formal school instruction, and encouraging contemplation about how decisions affect individuals and the collective public.

As these interventions take hold among the territory’s youth population, Ms. Holley says, a rise in awareness will spur increasing action to help the environment. Her approach is risk-free, she argued, as more education and empowerment of young Virgin Islanders has no downside. The implementation of her plan will be seen to bear fruit as residents would begin to hear more news of youth making an impact, she believes. The introduction of new programs in schools and social organizations would also be evidence that the plan is working, although she acknowledged that quantitative data would be more difficult to collect and collate.

While Ms. Holley’s presentation was adjudged the winning one overall, judges remarked on the high quality of work produced by all competitors. Nadjah Jn Phillip of the Giffit Hill School secured second place with her presentation, “The Impact of Social Media on Virgin Islands Teens”. In third place was Ne’Keyla Amey of the Charlotte Amalie High School, who presented on “Eliminating Our ‘Who You Know’ Mentality to Create a More Cohesive Society”. Honorable mention went to Donnalee Isaac of the Ivanna Eudora Kean High School with her topic “The Effects of Abortion on VI Teens.”

Female students in the 10th, 11th, or 12th grade who are interested in participating in next year's conference and competition are encouraged to reach out to Dr. Clarke via telephone (340.692.4149) or email (anna.clarke@uvi.edu).

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