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Hollywood's Robert Townsend Inspires St. Thomas Students in Film Workshops

Acclaimed filmmaker Robert Townsend and the USVI's John Wheatley lead an eight-week film program at Charlotte Amalie and Ivanna Eudora Kean high schools, teaching students scriptwriting, acting, and production while fostering local talent and creativity

The Arts / **Published On November 20, 2024 05:58 AM /**

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Robert Townsend, center right, with students at the film workshop in St. Thomas, organized by Dominion Global in collaboration with the V.I. Department of Education.

Students of the Charlotte Amalie and Ivanna Eudora Keane high schools are just about halfway through an eight week series of film workshops, organized by Dominion Global in collaboration with the V.I. Department of Education.

“It’s an afterschool program that brings them from concept development – from the time you come up with an idea in your mind – to what does it take for it to get to a final place – where it’s on Netflix, YouTube or whatever,” said John P. Wheatley, Executive Producer at Dominion Global and program director for this initiative. “For eight weeks, we’re going to bring people in from the mainland, working with professional guest speakers to highlight and show the kids the different departments in the film and creative process,” he said.



Dominion Global Executive Director, John Wheatley (center), and film workshop students.

Things started off slowly, Mr. Wheatley told the Consortium during an interview. “Day one, both schools were a flop. I’m talking about like, one person in the room,” he admitted. Undaunted, Mr. Wheatley engaged with teachers and administrators at both schools and embarked on a personal outreach. “We kind of hit the ground, like real grassroots.” As the word spread, interest grew. “Now today, we still have people signing up.” With a cohort of approximately 25 students, Mr. Wheatley is pleased with the interest shown by St. Thomian highschoolers.

“Those kids really, really, took off,” he gushed. “They're so locked in.” Last week's workshop focused on developing acting skills, guided by director and acting coach Brandon Thaxton. “They were in heaven,” Mr. Wheatley said. This week, the students will learn production from one of the most decorated names in the business – Robert Townsend, Mr. Wheatley's mentor.

Previous workshop coaches, Mr. Wheatley said, have commented positively on the students' high skill level. “They went out and created a Picasso-level masterpiece in just a small amount of time,” he said of their most recent activity. The writing coach from week one, AZ Yeaman from Bridge 17 Studio, has been gushing over the scripts the students have been developing, using tablets and software provided by Mr. Wheatley's program. The material was so promising, he said, that Ms. Yeaman decided to set up virtual sessions to continue to “develop and nourish them continually through the production process.” Mr. Wheatley named Ava Daniels and Dalton George from Ivanna Eudora Keane as two of the standout scriptwriters from that cohort. At Charlotte Amalie, “we have another whole set of amazing students,” he gushed.

Following the end of the program, students and their families, friends and well wishers will dress up for a red carpet premiere event, where the successfully pitched projects will be screened.

A film and arts festival for the wider Virgin Islands is planned for next summer, Mr. Wheatley says, all part of his plans to energize the film and creative industry in the territory, powered by two annual cohorts of students educated in film production techniques. There are plans to expand the program to other schools on St. Thomas, as well as to St. Croix, said Mr. Wheatley.

The program is being made possible partly from funding from the V.I. Department of Education, and partly from the goodwill of Mr. Wheatley's network and the favors he is able to call in. Some expenses he is covering directly out of pocket, but he says the overwhelming positive response from students has been worth it. “I'm fielding calls all day from kids, and I'm giving them my direct cell number. So they text me at 10 o'clock at night – how do I do this, how do I lock in here?”

Mr. Wheatley is proud that his initiative has proved a long-held belief: that “our people are our greatest resource. The talent in the Virgin Islands is some of the best talent in any space that you touch,” he declared, singling out Grammy-award-winning artist and songwriter [Theron Thomas](#) and tech industry leader [Rashida Hodge](#) as just two of the territory's luminaries. “These people are from right here, you know?”

He is hoping that soon, some of the students from his film workshops will be spoken about in the same breath.