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Three UVI Scientists Honored as 2024 Ocean Decade Champions for Groundbreaking Marine Research

Dr. Marilyn Brandt, Dr. Kristin Grimes, and Allie Durdall received national recognition for their work on coral reef restoration, mangrove conservation, and community-driven science, advancing efforts to protect marine ecosystems in the USVI

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L2R: Allie Durdall, Dr. Marilyn Brandt and Dr. Kristin Grimes. By. THE UNIVERSITY OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS

Three women scientists from the University of the Virgin Islands are among the 2024 Ocean Decade Champions, as selected by the U.S. National Science Foundation in collaboration with the Every Page Foundation.

Dr. Marilyn Brandt is a Research Professor of Marine and Environmental Sciences at UVI, who “focuses on understanding coral reef diseases and uses insights from this work to create effective strategies for coral conservation,” said the announcement from UVI. As director of the Reef Response coral restoration program, she leads the team’s efforts to restore reefs damaged from climate change or disease.

Dr. Kristin Grimes, a Research Associate Professor of Marine and Environmental Sciences at the university, focuses her inquiries on “human impacts to nearshore environments.” She has particular expertise in mangrove ecosystems, UVI says, and is examining “how community-driven science approaches can improve restoration, education, and stewardship outcomes.”

Both researchers also actively create connections with younger scientists – working or aspiring students – in order to inspire and guide the next generations of coral reef conservators and marine scientists working in other fields. In fact, Ms. Grimes works in conjunction with UVI’s third awardee on a mangrove outreach program in high schools.

Allie Durdall runs Mangroves in the Classroom along with Ms. Grimes, as co-leads of the Territorial Mangrove Monitoring Program. The Program Manager for GRROE USVI Mangroves, Ms. Durdall is committed to growing the research and restoration of the territory’s mangroves, as well as conducting outreach and education on the importance of mangrove ecosystems.

“I am incredibly proud of the work that our trailblazing scientists are conducting at UVI,” said UVI President Dr. Safiya George. “Their dedicated efforts not only impact our local environment but also have far-reaching effects as they collaborate and share their research with scientists around the world.” Noting that the honored scientists serve as mentors to the UVI students they encounter, Ms. George hailed the important role they play in attracting the next generation of citizens seeking careers in STEM.

The Ocean Decade Champions each received awards in the tens of thousands to support their careers. The UVI scientists plan to use the funds to present research at various international conferences in the coming months, as well as attend leadership training programs. They are also associated with the NSF Coastlines and People project Strong Coasts, which “brings together experts from Miami, Belize and the U.S. Virgin iSlands to advance coral and mangrove restoration for coastal resilience,” noted the UVI announcement.

The collaborative aspect of the initiative has been a highlight. “One of the things that has been exciting, and a really phenomenal opportunity, has been the chance to work with some of the brightest minds across these diverse regions. It’s been really amazing to learn from them and partner in different ways,” said Ms. Brandt.

“We know that women are still underrepresented in STEM fields generally, including the ocean sciences. This award is significant because it recognizes the great achievements that women have made, are making and will make to our profession,” says Dr. Grimes.