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Award-Winning, Crucian-born Midwife Seeks To Improve Healthcare In Her Home Town

Sascha James-Conterelli, a nurse midwife and NYU program director, returns to St. Croix to improve maternal healthcare through culturally congruent care and educational partnerships.

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Sascha James-Conterelli

“I want to make the Virgin Islands an exemplar for what health care could be, even though it's under-resourced,” said Sascha James-Conterelli, an expert in maternal child health, in an exclusive interview with the Consortium on Monday.

With roots in Estate Ruby, Christiansted, Ms. James-Conterelli comes from a long line of health practitioners. Decades after relocating to New York, she embarked on a pathway to becoming the

Program Director for Midwifery at NYU Rory Meyers and an award-winning nurse midwife. Now, Ms. James-Contereilli is back on St. Croix, with plans to use the territory as an example of what good maternal healthcare could look like.

The daughter of a physician, Ms. James-Contereilli was perhaps destined to follow suit. “She would come home...and I would look at her books and try to pronounce the big words,” Ms. James-Contereilli told the Consortium, reflecting on her mother’s influence. “She would talk about her experiences and it sparked my interest in healthcare.”

A product of the Free Will Baptist and Good Shepherd Elementary Schools in St. Croix, she relocated to Brooklyn and “learned to be a New Yorker over time,” but “my mom always sent me home every summer and every break.” Returning to the Big Island was solace for Ms. James-Contereilli, who says “there was no one ever to identify with home” around her in the Big Apple. “It wasn’t until I went to college at Howard that I even met folks from the Virgin Islands,” she remarked. Ms. James-Contereilli earned a bachelor of science in nursing from Howard University in 1996 and eventually completed her doctoral project in reducing elective deliveries through childbirth education at New York University in 2012.

After years of working in New York medical facilities and as a faculty member at several colleges and universities, Ms. James-Contereilli noticed a troubling trend. “In New York right now, black women have a nine times higher rate than a high school-educated white woman to die related to birth...and that’s a black, college-educated woman.” The statistics trouble Ms. James-Contereilli, particularly as medical clinics and hospitals are numerous and easily accessible by the city’s mass transit service.

New York, she said, “is supposed to be very representative of the rest of the country,” but the reality of the Virgin Islands refutes that claim. “We have one hospital in St. Croix. We don’t have access to all the services that we have in New York or anywhere else in the States. We don’t have the resources and the manpower...Why aren’t we dying at the rate that’s in the United States,” she had wondered. The Virgin Islands, she suggests, is an exception.

“Black and brown women do not die at alarming rates if you give them culturally congruent care with people that know them, look like them [and] understand them,” she maintains. She has made local connections with the help of Brittany Dawson, a local midwife that she met by chance at a webinar that she once hosted.

“What can I do to be an agent of change?”, Ms. James-Contereilli has asked herself. “If you don’t do anything, then you’re complacent and you are saying you’re okay with what’s going on.”

In 2023, she established Taino Whole Life Wellness and began building the confidence of Virgin Islanders – especially expecting mothers – in her obstetrician and midwifery services. The clinic is only one part of her efforts to bolster the services offered to expectant mothers both in the Virgin Islands and New York. The other facet involves practical educational opportunities.

“We are working on a partnership between the University of the Virgin Islands and NYU,” Ms. James-Contereilli explained. She anticipates extending NYU resources to “folks in the Virgin Islands who are seeking to become healthcare providers.” Educational opportunities are at the heart of this partnership. “My goal is ultimately to increase the workforce of the Virgin Islands in healthcare, but not with Americans coming to the Virgin Islands – with Virgin Islanders having the resources to increase our own workforce,” she said.

To make the partnership equitable, NYU students would be provided with opportunities to “understand more about what it is like to provide care for folks on an island.” Medical residents from the university would be able to come to the Virgin Islands, said Ms. James-Conterelli, and gain experience in a rural setting.

Ms. James-Conterelli also plans to extend these exchange opportunities to students at her alma mater, Howard University, where many Virgin Islanders are currently enrolled. Such a program, she says, will create “a pathway to advance their practice, and thus possibly come back home to provide service to their own people.”

With plans to exchange knowledge and experience between the three schools still in the pipeline, Ms. James-Conterelli continues to return home to St. Croix monthly and is preparing to deliver several babies whose mothers she made connections with when she established her local practice one year ago.

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