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UVI's 61st Commencement Celebrates Firsts, Legacy, and the Bold Spirit of the Class of 2025

From the first-ever PhD couple and twin graduates to the launch of the Executive MBA and Agriculture programs, UVI's Sheen Campus ceremony honored history, resilience, and promise, with powerful speeches from Hill Harper and student Kira Edwards.

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The University of the Virgin Islands' 2025 graduates on St. Croix. By. UVI

The 61st commencement ceremony on the University of the Virgin Islands' Albert A. Sheen campus on St. Croix took place on Thursday, with graduates, alumni, and specially invited guests all convening to celebrate the achievements of the UVI Class of 2025.

University president Dr. Safiya George beamed with joy as she welcomed guests to her alma mater for the ceremony while reminiscing about her first time on campus three decades ago. In her opening remarks, Dr. George — who officiated her first graduation as president of the institution yesterday — noted the series of historic events being celebrated by the university; the first cohort of graduates from the School of Agriculture and the Executive MBA programs, the first married couple to simultaneously graduate with PhDs, and the first set of twins to graduate together.

“You’ve already proven that you have what it takes to succeed, and that failure is not an option,” George told the UVI class of 2025, who named themselves the “Resilient, Eminent, Revolutionary Class of 2025.” UVI’s president was confident that her graduating students were ready “to go out into the world and do big, bold things.” They were also going to “make small, impactful, meaningful moves” as well, George anticipated. She hoped that some would return to the university to pursue advanced degrees and diplomas, and that most would settle into the community, putting their talents to work.



Keynote speaker Hill Harper, the award-winning actor, author, and social justice activist, highlighted the centuries of perseverance and survival that brought the graduates to the moment they were all sharing on Thursday morning. He pointed out the coral stone buildings, “quarried and built by our enslaved ancestors” that dotted the landscape of the territory. He spoke of walking through Estate Whim earlier that morning, observing “the big copper tubs, where our ancestors created today’s money – billions and billions and billions of dollars of wealth for generations of people that do not look like us.” The work of the ancestors lives on, Mr. Hill reminded the audience, telling them of bricks he saw on those buildings at Whim that still bore fingerprints from centuries ago.

“What fingerprints are you willing to leave?” he asked the students, reminding them that those who had come before couldn’t have known what would have come after their life spent laboring in servitude. “But somehow they believed, somehow they hoped...that someone would follow. Now see, here you are, the prayers they never got to see answered.”

Urging students to follow their passions towards success, Mr. Harper described turning down lucrative job offers from law firms after graduating from Harvard. “I wanted to be an actor,” he said. “I was the most over-educated waiter in New York City,” he joked, recounting his nights spent waiting tables in order to be available during the day for auditions. Despite his two graduate degrees from the Ivy League university, Mr. Harper believed that becoming an actor was his purpose. That made the drudgery in the diner – washing dishes, cleaning toilets – worthwhile. “I

wouldn't trade that path for anything,” he declared.

Mr. Harper, at the end of his remarks, was the first recipient of this year's batch of honorary degrees, followed by retired Brigadier General Deborah Francis Howell.



The audience then heard from Kira Edwards, an international student from Dominica and the first of her family to earn a college degree. Recounting her UVI journey, from arriving in the territory to grappling with challenging classes to finally becoming a graduate, she urged her classmates to savor their success. “Let us not rob ourselves of this joy by sprinting too fast toward the next goal...Let our victory breathe.”

On behalf of Governor Albert Bryan Jr., Lieutenant Governor Tregenza Roach reiterated the message delivered by Mr. Harper by noting how the past continues to echo in present day. He spoke of the life of Casper Holstein, a St. Croix native who moved to New York and became a key financier of “writers and artists of the Harlem Renaissance.” Hubert Henry Harrison, also from St. Croix, became a major figure in civic life in New York, he noted. Ashley Totten, the lieutenant governor said, helped to organize the first African American association to be recognized by the American Federation of Labor. He also noted that Edward Wilmot Blyden from St. Thomas went on to help found the country of Liberia.

The greatness of the Virgin Islands – and Virgin Islanders themselves – has never been in question, Mr. Roach observed. “At one time these little islands were at the center of the world.” They contributed immensely to Danish wealth. “Why a place like Denmark today can boast free healthcare and free education and to be one of the happiest countries in the world is because the ancestors – yours, ours – laid the foundation for that,” he told the graduates. “You stand on the shoulders of these incredible and awesome people, and we are excited and hopeful for where you will take us in the future.”

With that, each member of the graduating class of 2025 took their triumphant walk across the stage, receiving the degrees that mark the successful completion of their chosen course of study.