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## Soup Competition Draws Community Support for Virgin Islands Youth Orchestra

**Held at Emancipation Garden on March 7, the first VI Soup Masters Competition brought together restaurant and non-restaurant teams, youth orchestra performances, and community support to raise funds for the Partners for Strings after-school music program.**

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A day of soup tasting, live youth performances, and community support filled Emancipation Garden on Saturday as Partners for Strings Virgin Islands Youth Orchestra held its first signature fundraising event, the “VI Soup Masters Competition,” raising support for its free after-school music program for young people in the Virgin Islands.

Held on March 7 under sunny skies, the event brought together restaurant and non-restaurant teams that prepared a range of soups for the public to sample and judge. Tasting tickets were sold, allowing attendees to choose the soups they wanted to try and vote for their favorites. The fundraiser was organized to help cover expenses for the after-school youth orchestra music program.

Soup entries included Pumpkin, Vegetable, Vegan, Chicken, Corn, and Fish soups. There were also Seafood and Conch Chowders, along with one entry for Goat Water, which sold out quickly.

This year's competitors were Love Livin' Vegan, Rancho Latino, We Grow Food, St. Thomas Federal Credit Union, Hart's Kitchen, BurgerMaxx, An Hour Late, Celecia Hernandez, and Nomads Bar & Grille. After votes were cast by tasters, results were tallied across various soup categories, with four competitors emerging as first-place winners.



*The "First Place" Winners of the 2026 "VI Soup Masters Competition" are: Celecia Hernandez, who won in the Vegan Category; Lisa-Marie Hodge Smith, who accepted three first-place awards in the Fish, Red Meat, and Vegetable categories for the St. Thomas Federal Credit Union; and the Nomads Bar & Grille Team, which won in the Seafood Category. Harbor Hart, of Hart's Kitchen, won the Poultry Category, but was not present to accept the award. (Credit: Partners for Strings Virgin Islands Youth Orchestra)*

Cecelia Hernandez won first place in the Vegan Category for her Vegan Red Peas soup with trimmings.

St. Thomas Federal Credit Union won three categories, taking first place in the Fish Soup category for its Fish Soup, the Red Meat Category for its Goat Water, and the Vegetable Category for its Corn Soup.

Harbor Hart, head chef of Hart's Kitchen, won first place in the Poultry Category for his Chicken Soup. Although he was unable to attend, he still entered his soup in the competition.

Nomads Bar & Grille earned first place in the Seafood Category with its Conch Chowder. The Nomads team also included the U.S.V.I. Office of Gun Violence Prevention.

"The president of Partners for Strings, Inc., said, "Congratulations to all of our first place winners, as well as to every team who put in hours of work making their dynamic soup. I want to thank every participant seen and unseen. So much goes into these events, so I don't take anyone's contributions for granted. I truly appreciate all of the support from the students, parents and the

community. We all should be proud to say that we are a caring and compassionate community., Restaurants and non-restaurants donated their time effort, and great tasting soup to support the cause of transforming the lives of young people in the Virgin Islands through music."

Partners for Strings runs the Partners for Strings Virgin Islands Youth Orchestra, a free after-school program for at-risk youth ages 6 to 17. The program offers weekly training in orchestral instruments at G-Clef Music Academy on St. Thomas. Those instruments include violin, cello, brass, woodwinds, percussion, and steel pan.

During the event, the Intermediate/Advanced and Primers/Beginners Ensembles performed at the iconic Gazebo. Student members performed selections ranging from Classical to Reggae, including the jazz standard "Take Five," the arranged Quelbe medley "Sly Mongoose" and "Queen Mary," and Steel Pulse's reggae classic "Roller Skates."

Attendees also enjoyed additional activities provided by Happy Times Entertainment, and several young performers took the stage and impressed the crowd.

Ms. Gumbs also extended special thanks to the event's sponsors: G-Clef Music Academy, J. Benton Construction, Keswick Insurance, A90films, Happy Times Entertainment, KLR Restaurant Supplies, Rashida A. Hodge Charitable Fund, Discover Fund Management, LLLP, Thriving Charity Advocates, House of Patries and Deli, Lew Henley's Sewage Disposal, and the U.S.V.I. Office of Gun Violence Prevention.

For more information about Partners for Strings, Inc., or to donate in support of the youth orchestra music program, the public can call (340) 228-1126 or visit [www.partnersforstrings.org](http://www.partnersforstrings.org).