

St. Croix Adult Education Graduates Declare They Were ‘Pressed, But Not Defeated’ After Years of Sacrifice

After balancing children, jobs, bills and sleepless nights, the 35 graduates were celebrated as stories of sacrifice and transformation, with six applying to UVI, six heading to CTEC, and Dr. Bria James reminding them that long roads build strength.

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A St. Croix Adult Education graduate receives congratulations during Friday’s ceremony, where the Class of 2026 celebrated years of sacrifice, second chances and personal transformation. By. ERNICE GILBERT, V.I. CONSORTIUM.

The 2026 graduating class of St. Croix Adult Education celebrated more than the completion of an academic program on Friday. For many of the 35 graduates, the ceremony marked the end of a journey shaped by children, jobs, bills, setbacks, immigration, second chances and the determination to prove that a delayed education does not mean a denied future.

The class declared that they were “pressed, but not defeated” as they reached a milestone that education officials, speakers and graduates described as a story of sacrifice and transformation.

Night School Administrator Patricia Cottle-Matthew said each graduate represented a unique path. Six members of the class have already applied to the University of the Virgin Islands, while six others have chosen technical training at the Career and Technical Education Center as the next step in their educational journey. At least five graduates have already secured employment and are contributing to the territory’s economic development, she said.

“This is what success looks like,” Ms. Cottle-Matthew declared.

She paid special tribute to the four graduates from Haiti, including two sisters who began in the English as a Second Language program and are now honor students. Reflecting on the journey of Mylav and Dina Camille, Ms. Cottle-Matthew asked the audience to consider the significance of their progress.

“Think about the power of that for a moment,” she said.

Lieutenant Governor Tregenza Roach later connected their achievement to Haiti’s history as the world’s first Black Republic and to a broader legacy of resistance.

“This is a place that fought for freedom, just as you did,” the lieutenant governor said.

Education officials framed the graduates’ journey as a reflection of the realities adult learners often face, and as proof that life’s detours do not have to become permanent defeat.

“Many of you have balanced responsibilities, faced setbacks, carried burdens that others may never fully see, never fully understand,” said Carla Bastian-Knight, St. Croix superintendent of education. “Yet, you persisted. You showed up, you pushed forward. Today, you rise to the next level.”

“You have proven that pressure does not break you, it builds you,” Dr. Bastien declared.

Education Commissioner Dionne Wells-Hedrington built on that message, saying that a delay in education does not diminish the achievement.

“One of the greatest lessons your journey teaches us all is that there are many different paths to reach the same destination,” she declared. “Tonight proves that a delayed path is not a denied purpose.”

Mr. Roach also reminded graduates that learning has no fixed endpoint.

“Learning should be lifelong. It’s like a skipping rope, you could jump in and you could jump out at any point,” he said.

What mattered, he said, was that learners “stick with it and...inspire others to do it.”

While officials acknowledged the struggles the graduates had overcome, the clearest account of the class's journey came from the graduates themselves.

Salutatorian Brenda Lee Camacho said the class was not made up of traditional high school seniors.

"We were not your typical 18-year-old seniors, we were adults, and adulthood came with responsibility. Some of us had children, some had jobs to go to, and all had homes to maintain and bills to pay," she said.

"There were times when some of us became so overwhelmed by the added responsibility of school life that we felt like giving up... sleepless nights, children who needed our attention, and the demands of the workplace and the frustration of everyday life made our goals seem distant and unattainable," Ms. Camacho recounted.

Still, she said, the support students found in Adult Education helped them push through difficult moments.

"We kept encouraging and reminding each other that quitting was definitely not an option for any of us," she said.

By Friday's ceremony, Ms. Camacho said, the class had become "living proof that age is just a number."

Night School valedictorian Janiya Lopez said she never expected to stand before the class in that role.

"Standing here as valedictorian feels unreal," she said. "Coming to night school changed my life. It gave me a second chance, but more importantly, it gave me hope."

Keynote speaker Dr. Bria James summarized the evening's message by reminding graduates that the difficult road can produce strength.

"Sometimes life forces us to take the long road, but the long road often builds the strongest people," she declared.

Dr. James shared her own educational journey, which began at Pearl B. Larsen Elementary School and now includes a recently conferred PhD in business administration. Her path, she suggested, demonstrated that an educational detour does not erase a person's determination to succeed.

"Some of the strongest, wisest, and most successful people are the ones who had to fight for every single opportunity that they earned," she observed. "Tonight, your diploma represents your sacrifice. It reflects your discipline. It represents your growth."

Dr. James, 28, closed by urging the "irrepressible" Class of 2026 not to let fear block their next goal.

"There will be moments when doors close, moments when plans fail, moments when self doubt creeps in. But remember this: you already proved that you can do hard things," she said. "The next time life challenges you, remind yourself who you are. You are resilient, you are capable, you are stronger than you think. "

The ceremony celebrated 35 graduates whose paths to completion were different, but whose shared message was clear: pressure had shaped them, but it had not defeated them.

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