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Ivanna Eudora Kean’s “Transformative” Class of 2026 Graduates With College, Military and UVI Paths Ahead

IEKHS celebrated 159 graduates, with 16% choosing the U.S. Armed Forces, 46% committed to college and more than 40 headed to UVI, while Bryan urged them to seize opportunities, saying they are called “windows,” not beaches or oceans, because windows close

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Ivanna Eudora Kean High School 2026 graduates. By. V.I. DEPT. OF EDUCATION

Ivanna Eudora Kean High School’s Class of 2026 marked its graduation Wednesday with a ceremony that highlighted the students’ resilience after years shaped by the Covid-19 disruption, personal loss, academic growth and the transition from high school into college, military service and other paths.

“Your theme this year is powerful, thriving, dominating, and transcending,” said IEKHS Principal Sally Petty, addressing the “transformative” class.

Ms. Petty said this year’s graduating class included 159 seniors. Of that number, 16 percent had chosen careers in the United States Armed Forces, while 46 percent had already committed to attending a college or university. More than 40 graduates are expected to remain close to home as incoming freshmen at the University of the Virgin Islands.

One student has already started her path at UVI through the early admission dual enrollment program. Ms. Petty singled out Sharona Steven, whom she described as an “academic accelerator,” for beginning her journey as a UVI Buccaneer while still in high school.

“You have demonstrated that preparation, discipline, and vision can open doors ahead of schedule,” Ms. Petty told her.

Salutatorian Denaiya Smith reflected on the transformation that occurs between the first uncertain days of high school and the final walk as a senior. “Many of us walked into the school as freshmen, pretending we knew exactly what we were doing, when in reality we were trying not to get lost finding our classes and finding ourselves,” she said.

Ms. Smith also repeated a quote often attributed to singer-songwriter Lauryn Hill: “We can’t plan life. All we can do is be available for it.”

For Ms. Smith, that message carried personal weight. She spoke about how her life had changed in ways she did not expect, including the loss of her mother. “I want to acknowledge my mom, although she’s no longer physically here, her love, strength, and sacrifices continue to guide me every single day,” she said. “This milestone is not only a reflection of the hard work, but of the values she had instilled in me. I carry her with everything I do, and I know she would have been proud to see me here standing today.”

Ms. Smith’s grief was part of a broader story of disruption shared by the Class of 2026 across the territory, with students’ early academic years affected by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Valedictorian D’Liyah Pamphile recalled being in sixth grade when students were told they would be going home for two weeks because of a virus. “Like any child, I was beyond excited,” she said. But the temporary break turned into something much longer.

“Those two weeks turned into an entire seventh grade online and an eighth grade year spent going in and out of school. That sense of familiarity was disrupted, our way of learning changed completely, and for some of us, including myself, that sudden adjustment did more harm than good,” Ms. Pamphile said.

Still, she said the class found a way forward. “Our class has been through a lot, yet we still found a way to make it to the other side,” she said. According to Ms. Pamphile, the class earned its description as transformative. “We turn an uncertain and difficult time into a learning experience, and together we grew stronger because of it,” she said.

Education Commissioner Dionne Wells-Hedrington also spoke about change and the importance of adapting when life takes a different direction than expected. She told the graduates that when she was a senior preparing for adulthood, “I was going to be a pediatrician, nobody couldn’t tell me different, that was what I intended to be. Well, as you can see, that is not what I became.”

Before Dr. Wells-Hedrington spoke, keynote speaker Joss Springette reflected on her own graduation from IEKHS more than three decades earlier. She told the Class of 2026 that while the world changes, the principles that support a meaningful life do not.

“Technology changes, music changes, fashion changes, the world changes, but principles, the principles that build a meaningful life, they remain the same,” she said.

Ms. Springette told the graduates that they already understood that truth, and urged them to “keep that same energy.” She reframed the phrase not as a call to match negativity, but as a charge to maintain “the hope, the ambition, the confidence, the belief” they carried into the ceremony.

“Keep that energy, because life is about to test it,” she cautioned. She warned graduates that they would face challenges and urged them to take responsibility for their lives, including both successes and failures. Ms. Springette described two competing mindsets: victim consciousness and creator consciousness.

“Victim consciousness says my life is happening to me. The creator consciousness says my life is being shaped by my decisions. One mindset gives away power, the other one creates it,” she declared.

She also urged students to be discerning about their relationships. “Not everyone in your circle today is supposed to go into the future with you. Sometimes people become uncomfortable with your growth.”

Governor Albert Bryan Jr. advised the graduates to become comfortable with who they are and to build from that place of acceptance. “Once you accept that you're Black, Hispanic, male, female, lesbian, gay. Once you accept that you're short, tall, that life is going to be hard, then you can work on what can be,” he said.

The governor also encouraged the students to act quickly when opportunities arise. “They call them windows of opportunity, not beaches of opportunity or oceans of opportunity, because windows close. Take every one.”

He told students to maintain perspective regardless of difficulty. “People ask me all the time, why I'm always smiling, because life is too short to spend any time being unhappy about what is. You have an opportunity to make it what it can be. So, throughout your life, pursue your life like that toothpaste, squeeze every little drop out of it, make every minute count.”

He also advised them to avoid spending too much time scrolling on social media and to instead focus on learning and activities that enrich their lives. “While...they could take away your job, they could never take away the things that you learn,” he said.

After the speeches, Department of Education District Superintendent for St. Thomas-St. John Stefan Jurgen presented certificates of recognition and scholarships to the school's salutatorian and valedictorian. He also recognized one student for a distinct contribution to the school.

Mr. Jurgen said Ralph Teatree had completed several small maintenance projects at IEKHS under the supervision of a senior school official. In recognition of those efforts, Mr. Teatree received a starter toolkit and the promise of a fully funded course of study at the Rafael O. Wheatley Skills Center.

Following the distribution of other special awards, the Class of 2026 turned the tassels on their mortarboards, marking the close of their high school careers and the beginning of what comes

next.

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