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## Year-Long Masquerading Initiative Culminates at Dorsch Center With Youth Troupe, Cultural Bearers and Emancipation History

**Keeping Masquerading Traditions Alive drew more than 70 residents to the Dorsch Cultural Activity Center for a pre-Emancipation Day program connecting youth mentorship, masquerade history, drumming, market women traditions and the 1852 colonial ban law.**

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FREDERIKSTED, ST. CROIX — A year-long effort to preserve and teach Virgin Islands masquerading traditions culminated July 2 at the Dorsch Cultural Activity Center, where more than 70 residents attended a pre-Emancipation Day program focused on the history, music, movement and community role of one of the territory's oldest living traditions.

The program, *Keeping Masquerading Traditions Alive*, was presented by the Division of Virgin Islands Cultural Education in collaboration with the Caribbean Centers for Boys and Girls as part of Virgin Islands Freedom Week observances and the territory's pre-Emancipation Day programming. The initiative was supported through the Healing Humanities Initiative of the St. Croix Foundation.

The evening included scholarship, storytelling, music, movement and performance centered on Virgin Islands masquerading. Designed as a pre-Emancipation Day program, it invited the community to consider how masquerading, music, satire, storytelling and public performance helped Afro-Virgin Islanders preserve cultural memory, strengthen community and express identity in the years following the 1848 Emancipation.

Participants also explored the 1852 colonial prohibition on Christmas masquerading, a law that sought to suppress Black cultural expression and public gathering. The program traced the tradition's survival through generations of cultural bearers who kept it alive.

The event represented the culmination of more than a year of collaboration between the Division of Virgin Islands Cultural Education and the Caribbean Centers for Boys and Girls. Throughout the initiative, the Caribbean Centers for Boys and Girls served as the year-round home for rehearsals, youth mentorship, drumming instruction, movement classes, historical discussions and community engagement.

Together, the organizations created an intergenerational learning environment where cultural bearers, educators, families and young people worked together to preserve the masquerading tradition.

The program featured historical interpretation by Kendall Henry of the Ten Sleepless Knights, who provided technical assistance while discussing the history of masquerade music.

Participants also heard an archival recording of Eulalie Rivera, whose recollections showed how masqueraders used humor, song and community engagement to encourage children toward good behavior. The recording also illustrated the civic role masqueraders played in Virgin Islands society.

Youth musicians from the *Keeping Masquerading Traditions Alive* Drum Corps, led by Mr. Gideon Comey of the St. Croix Educational Complex, demonstrated traditional African rhythms developed through summer instruction.

*Music in Motion*, under the direction of Charlita Schuster, presented a *Market Woman* performance honoring the women whose work in the marketplace created opportunities for economic independence before and after emancipation. The performance also highlighted connections among foodways, agriculture, entrepreneurship and cultural resilience.

The program also featured Cultural Bearer Asta Williams, who shared knowledge of masquerade traditions, costume-making and community memory.

The Division extended special appreciation to Sandra Gerard, representing the Crucian Cultural Group, whose organization has spent decades preserving Virgin Islands cultural traditions. Through its stewardship of the annual Christmas Night Parades, the Crucian Cultural Group has helped return masquerading to Limpricht Park, the historic site where colonial authorities violently suppressed Christmas masqueraders in 1852.

Today, music, movement and community again fill those streets, reflecting the survival of a tradition carried forward across generations.

Weather conditions prevented a scheduled performance by the Guardians of Culture Moko Jumbies. However, Zayd Saleem joined the evening's discussion and reflected on the responsibilities of today's cultural practitioners to respectfully balance historical traditions with contemporary artistic expression while ensuring the tradition continues to evolve for future generations.

The Division also recognized the continuing contributions of the DemBaya Arts Conservatory, whose movement instruction, cultural programming and community engagement helped shape the initiative throughout the past year.

A special tribute was also held for the late Dr. Richard Schrader, recognizing his lifelong dedication to documenting and preserving Virgin Islands history and culture.

Over the past year, Keeping Masquerading Traditions Alive has grown beyond a series of workshops into a community-centered cultural education initiative. Participants represented the program at civic and community events across St. Croix, established the Keeping Masquerading Traditions Alive Youth Troupe, participated in the Crucian Christmas Festival Children's Parade and received national recognition through a feature in Mid Atlantic Arts. Writer Torhera Durand highlighted the initiative's work preserving and sharing Virgin Islands folklife through intergenerational learning.

In keeping with the customs of Virgin Islands masquerading, the Division does not identify individual masqueraders by name. Within the tradition, the mask represents the collective character and shared cultural inheritance rather than the individual performer.

The Division of Virgin Islands Cultural Education thanked the adult masqueraders who continue to volunteer as mentors and cultural stewards, along with every member of the Keeping Masquerading Traditions Alive Youth Troupe. Through rehearsals, performances, school visits, civic events and community celebrations, the Division said they have shared their time, talent and knowledge with the people of the Virgin Islands.

The Division also extended appreciation to the St. Croix Foundation, the Caribbean Centers for Boys and Girls, the Virgin Islands Council on the Arts for stewarding the Dorsch Cultural Activity Center, Music in Motion, Mr. Gideon Commey, Charlita Schuster, Kendall Henry, Cultural Bearer Asta Williams, Sandra Gerard and the Crucian Cultural Group, Zayd Saleem and the Guardians of Culture Moko Jumbies, CHANT (Crucian Heritage and Nature Tourism), 28B Studios, DemBaya Arts Conservatory, parents, volunteers, educators, scholars, photographers, technicians and community members whose partnerships supported the initiative.

As the Virgin Islands commemorates 178 years since Emancipation, Keeping Masquerading Traditions Alive demonstrates how partnerships among education, philanthropy, community organizations, cultural bearers, artists, families and volunteers can help preserve living traditions while creating opportunities for the next generation to learn, practice and carry forward the cultural heritage of the Virgin Islands of the United States.