

The Virgin Islands Consortium

From Fed Up to Fighting Back: GIVI Gets Out The Vote

Politics / **Published On October 03, 2014 08:46 AM /**

Cynthia Graham **October 03, 2014**



What do you do when you're unhappy with the political status quo? Well, you grab two of your closest friends, change your mindset, get registered to vote, then...hit happy hour.

This scenario describes how the now seven-person political action group Get Involved VI (GIVI) got its start just a mere seven months ago in March. And, in that short period of time, the group has been making waves all across St. Thomas.

Theirs is an inspiring story.

"The group was birthed from a womb of complaints," explained group member, Melanie Turnbull. "We started out as three co-workers constantly airing our grievances about Virgin Islands politics and the dismal state of the territory."

But, Turnbull said, a light bulb would soon turn on, ultimately showing her and her friends that they were a part of the problem.

"We were three, educated young professionals and none of us were registered to vote here in the Virgin Islands," she admitted.

And that's when things took off.

"We set out to change our thinking and in the process, help others to change," Turnbull said. "Our apathy served as our wake-up call. Since then, our group has grown from a disgruntled group of three to a group of seven, like-minded individuals vested in change."

So, exactly who is GIVI?

"GIVI is a non-partisan organization and we are not aligned with any candidate for office," Turnbull explained. "We maintain neutrality in our efforts."

In order to effectively do that, Turnbull pointed out the group's objectives remain simple: to increase the number of registered voters and to create a more informed electorate. And, GIVI is intentional about engaging a specific segment of that electorate.

"As an organization, our focus is on the young adult demographic of 18- 40 year olds," Turnbull explained. "By targeting this age group, we hope to inject the community with new passion and zeal for the place they call home. It is time for this group to accept the baton of activism passed by the older generation."

Happy Hour Meets Politics

While getting out the vote is at the core of GIVI's existence, you won't find these 29-35 year-old professionals setting up shop in front of a mall or a store front. Nah, think a little more fancy. A lot more fun.

"Instead of the typical drive, we opted to do happy hours where people were able to get registered to vote, view the ballot machines, and participate in ballot casting demonstrations, while in a relaxed environment," Turnbull explained. The group's very first happy hour/voter registration drive was held at Fresh Bistro in Yacht Haven Grand and the second was held at Eclipse Lounge. Both events offered drink specials, food, games and live music.

"Young adults may not go to a store front or the mall in the afternoon, but they will grab a drink at the end of the work day," Turnbull said.

When asked what is her sense of the interest and engagement levels of young voters on St. Thomas during this election cycle, Turnbull said the interest is there, but much work is still needed to turn it into action.

"Young voters are very interested, particularly in this cycle, due to the current state of the territory," she offered. "We believe the issue is that of conversion . . . converting emotions to action. This is at the core of GIVI. We are attempting to turn young voters' frustrations into action."

Gubernatorial Forum

GIVI's stellar, first-time effort into the Virgin Islands' political scene will culminate with a Gubernatorial Forum on Sun., Oct. 5 at the Charlotte Amalie High School Auditorium from 5:00 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. Turnbull confirmed all five of the candidates--Donna Christensen, Kenneth Mapp, Soraya Diase Coffelt, Mona Barnes, and Sheila Scullion--will be in attendance. The candidates for Lieutenant Governor will not be participating in the forum, but they are welcome to attend.

Of the forum's purpose, Turnbull said GIVI "felt the need to create an opportunity for a live, unadulterated" discussion, adding that in past elections, candidates were observed to be "wiggling out of answering questions, drifting off topic, and rambling about irrelevant past experiences." She said with GIVI having full control over Sunday's program, "we hope to manage the forum in a way that reaps substantive answers."

With that, Turnbull provided a layout of the forum's format. She said in the first round, gubernatorial candidates will field prepared questions and the second round will provide an opportunity for audience members to direct questions to the candidates. The forum is open to the general public and all are invited to attend.

Besides Turnbull, other GIVI members are Su-layne Walker, Amanda Warner, Alvincent Hutson, Janelle Sarauw, Allyson Gregory and Aliya Charlery.

Turnbull explained that group members do not have specific titles or roles; rather, she prefers to describe her peers as "seven fighters, movers and shakers that run the organization like a well-oiled machine. It's different, but it's us."

While there are no immediate plans for GIVI to continue its political efforts after the November 4 General Election, as Turnbull admitted the group was established specifically for the 2014 election cycle, she said not to count them out.

"We are a community of seven do-gooders with an insatiable passion for the Virgin Islands, but at this point we have to pace ourselves, re-define our purpose, and then create a more comprehensive identity in the community. Stay tuned."

Ms. Turnbull, we surly will.

Photo: (L to R) Amanda Warner, Aliya Charlery, Janelle Sarauw, Alvincent Hutson, Allyson Gregory, Melanie Turnbull, and Su-layne Walker.