

The Virgin Islands Consortium

McDonald's Launches Happy Meal Books Program In The Virgin Islands

VIC News / **Published On January 10, 2015 09:37 AM /**

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For the next two weeks, McDonald's franchises in the Virgin Islands will receive a mini-makeover to one of its popular menu items for a good cause. The fast food chain's new Happy Meal Books program, a nationwide initiative to promote literacy among children, will offer Happy Meal customers a children's book as a complimentary gift in place of the traditional toy products the menu item is known for offering.

The effort is designed to help families "celebrate the joy of reading," said Michael Slezak, operations consultant for McDonald's on St. Croix.



St. Croix's bookmobile

The program was launched at a special ceremony held Friday at McDonald's Villa La Rein restaurant on St. Croix and will run Jan. 9 through Jan. 22 at all McDonald's franchises across the territory.

Happy Meal customers will receive four limited-edition books in print featuring McDonald's Happy Meal characters. The books include *Big Nate in a Class By Himself*, *Flat Stanley Goes Camping*, *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie*, and *Pete the Cat and His Magic Sunglasses*, and "brings nutrition, imagination and play to life in a fun way," according to a press release issued about the initiative.

"This is the latest step in McDonald's efforts to enrich the lives of families and part of a broader book strategy that would combine the fun of our Happy Meals and new partners to inspire more family time reading," Slezak said in a prepared statement.

In addition to offering books in all of its Happy Meal packages, McDonald's has partnered with the Virgin Islands Public Library System to host public readings on Saturday, Jan. 10 and 17 at its Lockhart Gardens restaurant on St. Thomas and at the Villa La Rein restaurant. Guest readers will include former First Lady Cecile de Jongh and Miss Virgin Islands Ashley Gabriel, who will conduct readings on St. Thomas. The 2014-2015 Crucian Christmas Carnival Princess Jahmayah Hospedales, 11, and performer D'Nyce will hold public readings on St. Croix. Organizers encourage children to bring their favorite book to the readings and come dressed in a costume representing the book's theme or as one of the book's characters.

At the launch event, McDonald's also made a \$500 donation to the Virgin Islands Public Library System for the purchase of books for the territory's libraries and its two bookmobiles.

Ingrid Bough, territorial director of libraries, archives and museums, accepted the gift.

"In economic challenging times, especially with budgetary concerns with the Government of the Virgin Islands, and particularly the libraries, this is a wonderful opportunity and we're very grateful that McDonald's has invited us to be a partner in this national initiative," she said. "It's very important, especially for the early development of children,

to read and for all of us to read. So, this is an exciting program."

Bough said the money will be used to purchase children's books written by local authors.



rate the Happy Meal with an important issue in our added. "Thanks to McDonald's for this donation."

Estate Villa La Reine McDonald's

A handful of students from the Juanita Gardine Elementary School were also on hand to help launch the program. Rose Charles, McDonald's territory marketing director and former Juanita Gardine student, said students attending Friday's launch event would receive complimentary copies of all four books in the Happy Meal Books program.

Hospedales, the 2014-2015 Crucian Christmas Carnival Princess who will be one of the featured readers at the public reading events, is a student at the school. When asked to share her thoughts on the McDonald's program, the articulate sixth grader said, "I think it's very nice and encourages children to read."

The youngster went on to say she enjoys reading, something she does "everyday because the more I read the more I know." She said her favorite books are the *Dork Diaries*, *Junie B. Jones* and *Dear Diary* series.

However, Hospedales credited her mother, Yomayra Melendez, for her love of reading.

"I developed my love for reading from my mom," she said. "She loves to read and it rubbed off on me."

The bookmobile was also at Friday's launch event to further promote reading. Bough explained that the school bus-sized automobile is outfitted with state-of-the-art features, including two flat screen TVs, more than 2,000 books, internet stations and more. The bookmobile will be on hand at the public reading events for use by the community.

Since 2011, McDonald's has been making changes to its menu in the interest of "children's happiness and well-being," the company said. That year, the company began including apple slices and a smaller kids-sized fry in its Happy Meals. The company also

committed to including "a nutrition or active lifestyle message" in communications geared toward its youngest customers. In 2013, McDonald's included a calorie count feature on its menu boards.

Feature Image: Michael Slezak and Rose Charles of McDonald's along with students from the Juanita Gardine Elementary School at the McDonald's Happy Meal Books program launch, Jan. 9 on St. Croix.

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