

The Virgin Islands Consortium

'Man Up' Conference Brings Hope To Territory's Young Men

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The Virgin Islands have gotten off to a rough start, as it relates to violent crime in 2015. With more than eight homicides already recorded this year, not to mention other crimes that did not lead to death, it has been an uphill battle for police officers who must respond to these incidents on a daily basis.



Students from various St. Croix schools

attend 'Man Up' at UVI

But the University of the Virgin Islands' (UVI) annual 'Man Up' conference, held Wednesday on St. Croix for young men attending junior and senior high schools, has always been a source of light when reality seems disheartening.

This year, the results of the conference -- which included the likes of bestselling author, Chris Gardner; St. Thomas songwriters-producers, Rock City; and Andrew Morrison, founder of the Small Business Camp -- sparked hope in the hearts of those who attended. Hope that, after listening to the guest speakers talk about perseverance, sacrifice and dedication, the young men -- hundreds of them in attendance -- would steer clear of violence and instead lean toward a positive lifestyle.

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In a show of support, government officials also attended the event, including Sens. Kurt Violet, Terrence "Positive" Nelson, Neville James and Sammuel Sanes. Former Sen. Diane Capehart also attended, and Fiona Stokes, formerly with the *Daily News*, now Legislative Correspondent/Researcher with the Office of Sen. Kenneth Gittens,



Officials in attendance at UVI's 'Man Up' 2015

However, 'Man Up' had little to do with government officials and was even less about the featured guests. Instead, the event was all about the young men gathered underneath the large tent on UVI St. Croix's campus, where speakers imparted knowledge, hope and the importance of holding on to their dreams.

Gardner, whose life was the subject of his bestselling book and 2006 film, *Pursuit of Happyness*, starring Will and Jaden Smith, spoke about his upbringing and not knowing his father. Yet, because of his strong mother, who taught him that he could achieve

anything, Gardner said he became the man he is today.

"My father's name was Thomas Turner, from Louisiana. I went to his funeral and never cried. I did not know him," Gardner said.

Even so, that was the least of the author's speech, as he touched the hearts of seemingly all in attendance when he told the teen boys that there should be no plan B. Gardner relayed some of his life's story to the attentive audience, and explained that having a plan B only distracts from the main vision.

Gardner's story was also the main takeaway for most in attendance.

But that's not to discredit Rock City, the songwriting and record production duo comprised of brothers Theron and Timothy Thomas, who has found success in the music industry, and has written songs for some of the world's biggest pop stars, including Rihanna and Miley Cyrus. The brothers also recounted the events that lead to them becoming a success story, which lends itself to the notion of persevering under the most difficult and grim circumstances.

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The men spoke of being misunderstood by producers on the mainland, being sidelined because of their St. Thomas accent, and although they had the skills, it seemed impossible to catch that ever-so-important break. Nonetheless, even after being homeless, the brothers stood strong and determined within their hearts that success would not come -- they had to go find it.

The message Rock City relayed to the young men that "nothing good comes easy," prompted the brothers to ask one of the youth in attendance who said he had a passion for baseball?"



Teachers on stage at 'Man Up' 2015

"Because we weren't making any money [while pursuing our music career]," the brothers said. "Because if you're making money, you're definitely not homeless. You must love baseball so much that even if you were homeless, you'd still want to play ball and you wouldn't care."

Gardner and Rock City also encouraged the young men to stick to the plan until success is achieved -- and even then, to keep on perfecting their craft.

Andrew Morrison taught the young men about financial success in his workshop.

Morrison, an entrepreneur many times over, has delivered this program in major U.S. cities, including Chicago, Orlando, New York, Philadelphia, Boston, and Washington D.C. In addition, he has offered the course in international locations such as Toronto, Jamaica and Nigeria.

He spent his time building on what was already accomplished by Gardner and Rock City by having the youth participate in exercises he believed would help guide them to a certain path to success.

He was also energetic and gave away scholarships to various schools for participating in



Students boarding school buses as they leave

'Man Up' 2015

"[Today's event] really helped me to know that I don't have to put down myself about anything, and I could do anything if I really try," said Antonio Martinez, who was most inspired by Rock City's presentation. "It gave me a sense that I should not give up."

Martinez, an 8th grader, who wants to be a chemical engineer, added, "I'm leaving here a different person for sure; because it helped me to try and change myself and be better."

'Man Up' was also held at UVI's St. Thomas campus on Tuesday.