

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Positive Guidance Youth Club Seeks Support To Get To 'Small Fry' Tourney In Orlando

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Cynthia Graham **March 20, 2015**



St. Croix's Positive Guidance Youth Club is set to attend the Small Fry Basketball 47th Annual International Tournament in Orlando, April 6-9, but money to finance the trip for all 12 of the athletes expected to participate in the internationally televised competition has been hard to come by.

Besse Gonzalez, club founder, spoke with *VI Consortium* about the organization's needs. He says that after numerous fundraising efforts, including water and food sales, as well as a poorly attended tournament fundraiser the club hosted some weeks ago, it has left the travel for at least three of the players up in the air.

"Right now, we're fighting for some extra funds," he said. "Everything is set up, it's just trying to foot the bills and meet the needs.

And the need is great. Gonzalez detailed the full cost of the trip:

- Air travel is now upwards of \$600 each for the remaining three athletes because of missed deadlines, due to lack of funding
- The tournament's hotel package is a total of \$6,001 for the week, and includes tickets to Disney theme parks
- Van rental is \$683.74
- Food for the week is \$2,940 (\$35 per child)

Five adult chaperons will accompany the students to Orlando.

This is the second year Gonzalez's youth club will participate in the Small Fry competition, which is geared toward basketball enthusiasts age 13 and under, and measuring no more than 5'1" for boys and 5'3" for girls. He said the competition's goal is to instill confidence in and celebrate smaller basketball players, although they may not yet have the physical height. often upwards of 6 ft., that is generally coveted by those



Positive Guidance Youth Club founder

Besse Gonzalez with team members

Gonzalez said he was grateful to have received sponsorship dollars from one donor for the 2014 tournament, as well as support from the V.I. Tourism Department through the supply of promotional materials for the team to distribute in Orlando. This year, however, he said neither of those avenues have yet responded to his requests for help.

"That was really great on Tourism's part last year; we've reached out on two occasions this year and haven't heard anything back yet," he said. "We're hoping something works out before we go up there, unless we'll just be giving some Positive Guidance tee shirts."

He continued: "Sponsorship has been really difficult. I don't know what else I can do; I'm just trying to keep some of these youngsters off the street."

Gonzalez said the St. Croix team, as well as the Jaguars from St. Thomas and teams from Puerto Rico will be among the approximately 36 teams competing in this year's Small Fry tournament, which will be held at the ESPN Center. In addition, he said the St. Croix team is not made up only of students who participate in his year-round youth club. He pointed out that the Nov.-Dec. tryouts were opened to any student on St. Croix who

wished to participate.

"I sent out an invitation because I didn't want to represent Positive Guidance alone through children that participate in Positive Guidance," he said. "I wanted to represent St. Croix, so I invited every youngster to give them that opportunity. How many youngsters have been to Disney? So, I'm using it as an incentive."

And offering opportunities to travel to tournaments on the mainland or throughout the Caribbean have been a part of Gonzalez's strategy to encourage students to perform well in school.

"I let students know if they want to travel, they have to be on their best behavior and maintain a GPA of 3.0 or above," he said. "It motivates some of the kids to work harder."

Then listing off a selection of schools, both public and private, with students that participate in Positive Guidance, Gonzalez said he also puts in the work to ensure the "kids are doing well academically, and they have respect and conduct themselves the right way."

"I go to the schools, I check up on the kids' grades, some of the kids who are not doing that well, I give them more emphasis," he explained. He said when he visits John H. Woodson Jr. High, he usually spends about three hours on the campus and have visited the school about "ten times already this year."

He continued: "I think if we start to mold our kids to respect authority and adults, to respect other peoples' property, to think about academics now so they can have a brighter future academically, then another group of youngsters will follow. You'll have a better street life and community. You can't start with everyone at one time; you start with a small group at a time and then move on."

Gonzalez, who does not receive a salary for his work with the Guidance organization, is an employee at St. Croix's Youth Rehabilitation Center (YRC) and sees first-hand the "lack of strong-minded youngsters."

"What I see in YRC is what pushes me to work with these youngsters in our community in getting them to not come to YRC," he said. "Along with the passion, I use basketball as the magnet to draw them. But it's not a basketball club; it's a youth club. It's trying to empower youth and build better and stronger self-esteem within our youngsters."

Positive Guidance Youth Club was established in 2008 and is the youth division of Gonzalez's Guidance Sports Club, Inc. It offers after-school and summer programming for children ages six to 18. The group meets at the Elena L. Christian Jr. High School gymnasium.

In 2013, Gonzalez was given the National Association of Social Workers Public Citizen of the Year award for the Virgin Islands chapter.

For more information or to donate, call (340) 277-6451 or send email to besse_gonzalez@yahoo.com.

