

The Virgin Islands Consortium

John H. Woodson Jr. High 'Celebrates And Re-creates' Crucian Culture

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In ongoing celebrations of Virgin Islands History Month, the John H. Woodson Jr. High School on St. Croix recently held its Second Annual Cultural Expose with the theme, "Celebrating, Recreating and Tasting V.I. Culture at Woodson 2015." The event was designed to give students both the experience and taste of Crucian culture.

"We started out last year on a slightly smaller scale and it was very successful, so we decided to graduate to a larger scale this year," explained social studies teacher, Rhea Dowling.

Dowling said this year, the activity was expanded into a day-long event.

"The entire day is not just surrounding food," she explained. "It's surrounding the children now going to workshops."

The day's activities offered students instruction and opportunities to observe a full range of Crucian culture, including basket weaving, masquerade mask making, as well as numerous cooking classes, including making johnny cakes and pates.

"We taught them how to turn fungi," she laughed. "You know turning fungi is hard. Not everyone can get the fungi right."

Another thing that was introduced at this year's expo was a workshop geared toward the young men at the school. Dowling praised the activity as something good "because we are losing the young men in our society so fast."

"We made sure we brought in Mr. Jeffers, and he was showing the kids the art of making fish pots," she explained. While Jeffers did not demonstrate how the items are made from scratch, "it came in pieces and they were able to put it together."

The young men also enjoyed a session on how to properly construct a chicken coup, Dowling said.

"We know there are little boys out there who may not be as handy, but they were given the opportunity today to see things that they can do," she said.

As far as the young ladies, Dowling said, "The simple things in learning how to stitch, to sew, things like hem their school skirts if the hem comes out, there was a lady here showing stitching techniques and how to add designs to their clothes, if they wanted to."

Dowling also said there was a natural hair braiding demonstration that was attended by both male and female students.

"That was really wonderful because we need to go back to that," she said. "We all grew up with our hair being braided naturally, now everybody has gone to the weaves. But the students need to understand that natural hair is beautiful."

In addition, there was a kite-making workshop. Dowling pointed out the workshop began a few days before the expo "because it gave the children time to learn about the design factor, as well as putting the kite together."

Other workshops also included jewelry making and cake decorating.

Following the workshops, students assembled for a program that included quadrille dancing and steel pan music, something Dowling said the school had been trying to get off the ground for some time.

"We have our own instruments here at Woodson and we have been trying to develop a steel orchestra for quite a while, but funding has been a problem," she said. However, Dowling said the school received a small grant that allowed them to "get an instructor for four visits and he taught the students three songs, and they played the three songs for us today." She lauded the group's performance as "wonderful."

Students also enjoyed "A Taste of Woodson," where the entire school brought in various local foods and drinks to share among the school body.

The event took place on March 20 and was planned within a month, Dowling said. Parents were invited to attend and some also volunteered.

"Our entire staff was with us and they worked along with some of the culture-bearers to make sure our rooms were orderly, the students stayed on task and that they learned a lot.

As for what students thought of the day's activities, Dowling said one young man approached her during lunch and said, 'Thank you, Ms. Dowling, for doing this.' However, she stressed, "It's not about Ms. Dowling, it's about all of us."

She added: "It's wonderful to be in a community like this where our students can learn a lot of the things we learned as children."

In addition to Dowling, Woodson's V.I. History committee chairperson, the event was also coordinated by Margo Fredericks, Stephanie Augustine and other staff members. Dowling also thanked the school's administrators who offered their encouragement and support of the team in their planning efforts.