

The Virgin Islands Consortium

5th Annual Parent Conference Draws Hundreds To Marriot Frenchman's Reef Hotel On St. Thomas

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ST. THOMAS – Close to 400 parents and grandparents converged on the lower level of the Marriot Frenchman's Reef Hotel on St. Thomas September 6 for the 5th Annual Parent Conference, hosted by the Virgin Islands Department of Education, St. Thomas Office of the Insular Superintendent, a press release DOE issued late Sunday has made known.

This year's conference was themed "Parents and Educators: Partners in Student Success."

According to conference organizers, the District had initially prepared for approximately 250 attendees, but was pleasantly surprised by the large numbers of parents that showed up to learn and become equipped for the upcoming school year. The surge in attendance required additional seating, food and beverage to be provided, something Racquel Berry-Benjamin, deputy superintendent, described as “a good problem to have.”

“As I visited the various sessions being conducted, I could see the parents were all very engaged,” Berry-Benjamin added. “I am excited about the year ahead.”

Superintendent Dionne Wells-Hedrington also praised the large turnout and said her office is committed to providing parents with the support they need to be successful. She encouraged parents to get involved and volunteer at their children’s schools, adding that partnership between the District and



(L to R): Deputy Superintendent

Michael Harrigan, District Director of School and Community Affairs Jerae Forde, Superintendent Dionne Wells-Hedrington and Deputy Superintendent Racquel Berry-Benjamin pose with Andres “The Cuban Guy” Lara (center) at the 5th Annual Parent Conference held at the Marriot Frenchman’s Reef Hotel on St. Thomas on September 6.

A highlight of the one-day event, which convened at 8 a.m. and concluded at 3:30 p.m., came with a keynote presentation by Andres Lara, widely known as “The Cuban Guy.” The renowned motivational speaker captivated conference-goers with his ‘rags to riches’ story, which began with him entering the U.S. as a 16-year-old Cuban refugee not knowing how to speak English to him emerging as a top national speaker, international-selling author and millionaire by the age of 24.

In his presentation, Mr. Lara encouraged parents to listen to their children in order to help young people steer clear of destructive choices and affiliations. Furthermore, he said parents should pursue their own dreams, no matter how late in life, so their children could see the value of never giving up.

Senator Jean Forde, chairman of the Senate Committee on Education and Workforce Development, was also on hand.

"I am extremely happy with the turnout. It shows we have a lot of good parents who care about their children and want to learn how to become better parents," he said. Senator Forde also encouraged parents to remain actively involved in their children's education.

Elvis Sprauve, whose two children will attend Ivanna Eudora Kean High School this year, said both he and his wife were pleased with the information they received at the conference.

"We had a wonderful experience and learned a lot, particularly that we should be monitoring our children's Facebook pages and online activity," he said.

Parent Kendra Prosper also shared Mr. Sprauve's sentiments. "Everything was good. The motivational speaker was wonderful and I look forward to the workshops," she said.

Jerae Forde, district director of school and community affairs who spearheaded the conference's planning, said she was also pleased with the attendance and sought to provide parents with useful information.

"I want parents to know that in order to raise a child you have to raise a whole child," she said, adding, "Many of the sessions are geared toward raising children in a modern society."

The day's workshops included sessions on Internet dangers, age appropriate messages for children, health and nutrition, gang awareness and jail prevention, and others. There were also musical selections by the EBO Steel Owls Orchestra. A host of community vendors also participated, including Family Resource Center, My Brother's Workshop, VIPD, Parents Matters and more.