

The Virgin Islands Consortium

'Club Clean-Up' Hitting St. Thomas Beaches; Growing Community Gardening Effort

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ST. THOMAS -- An article found on a [kids' news site](#) about the buildup of sargassum weed on Caribbean beaches had Antilles fourth-grader Ellie Papataros looking to join local cleanup efforts, but when the nine-year-old gathered a group of friends for a day on the East End, she found a bigger issue: piles of trash had overtaken the coastline instead, according to a press release Antilles School here issued today.

"There was even trash in the seaweed," Papataros said. "Really, if there wasn't so much trash everywhere, then we could have focused on the seaweed, but after that day, our mission changed."

Papataros has now channeled her efforts into a project called “Club Clean Up,” which has brought a small group of students together twice a month for countless weekend hours spent picking up trash on local beaches. So far, the students have led two cleanups – one at Vessup Beach and another at Cabrita Point – that have netted upwards of 20 heavy-duty construction bags filled to the brim with garbage.

“I can’t even believe what we’ve found,” Papataros said. “There are old diapers on the beach, bones, burnt clothes and at Cabrita, wires, old car parts and just bottles filled with bits and pieces of things.”

To encourage participation, Papataros has so far supplied the bags, gloves, hand sanitizer and any first aid kits, but once the group gets bigger, more help from participants will be needed. Papataros and her mom have continued to advertise the group on local social media forums to bring in more students outside Antilles that could help grow “Club Clean Up” into a larger beautification effort.

“We wanted to start small but ideally, we would like to make it island wide,” mom Jen Papataros said. “Working with kids, you have to be realistic and make sure you shape the project, or each cleanup, so that they can continue to take away the important lessons, like having respect for the place we live in.”

Eventually, Papataros said she would like to involve fellow third to fifth graders in a community garden project that will be geared toward growing food for the territory’s homeless population.

Feature Image: Club Clean Up, led by Ellie Papataros (middle, front) celebrates its most recent beach cleanup.