

The Virgin Islands Consortium

St. Croix Organization Announces Major Initiative To Support 12 At-Risk Fifth Grade Lew Muckle Students Through College

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Ernice Gilbert **January 24, 2016**



ST. CROIX -- A local organization has committed to supporting in multiple ways 12 at-risk fifth grade students from the Lew Muckle Elementary School here, staying with these students through twelfth grade and even into college. Above Resa O'Reilly, founder and program developer of [Project Promise](#).

The announcement was a major milestone for Ms. O'Reilly and the group's board after a lot of effort. But as many who wind up creating meaningful ventures will attest to, success is almost always preceded by difficulties, and at an event held to officially announce the

chosen school -- as well as to thank sponsors for their generous support -- Ms. O'Reilly revealed to an attentive audience parts of what led her to this point.

"I remember when I was laid off from my job at the Department of Justice almost four years ago; I was devastated," Ms. O'Reilly told The Consortium at the elegant event where the major announcement was made. "I had just gotten a new baby, and it was extremely difficult for me." Ms. O'Reilly fought back tears while she spoke last night at the



ing atop the highest point of a Estate view of the this island.

Resa O'Reilly speaking at the

Project Promise event.

The affair's guest list was a mix of high-caliber residents (Senators Neville James and Terrence Nelson were spotted, as well as Albert Bryan, Jr., former Department of Labor commissioner and his wife), and other attendees connected to Project Promise in some fashion. The food was prepared by a top local chef, and the courtyard decorations were intentionally intimate.

Ms. O'Reilly recounted her difficult days -- and years -- following her dismissal at DOJ. However, Ms. O'Reilly said if she was not laid off , "I would have been stuck at the same job, and constantly wishing I had pursued my dreams," she said while expressing that making a difference in the community, especially through a youth-support program, has been her lifelong purpose. "Everything is perspective," she added, "it's the choices we make after a difficult decision that will determine the outcome of our future."

The initiative, dubbed the Caterpillar Project, will see the twelve selected students meeting with staffers after school on a daily basis through high school and into college. Overtime, the project aims to become a "support system" for the youth, with close ties to adults who take a personal interest in their growth and development, according to a press kit provided to media on Saturday night.

The approach, which Project Promise says is deliberately holistic, includes the following:

- Life Coaching – Weekly one-on-one sessions with a trained life coach to build self-esteem, vision, hope and self-worth; and help participants learn how to set and achieve goals. The Life Coaching Program promotes personal and social growth, thus helping the youth become more responsible and accountable, and ultimately

lead fulfilling and purposeful lives.

- Mentoring – Similar to a “Big Brother/Big Sister” program, participants will be carefully matched with rigorously screened, trained, and supervised volunteer mentors, who each commit to at least one year of service. Weekly one-on-one get-togethers and an evidence-based mentoring program provide consistent encouragement and guidance to help youth get and stay on the right path.
- Community Service – Learning to give of yourself to help others is an integral part of the growth process. Participants take part in meaningful projects focused on the revitalization of our community. These projects also function as team-building activities, which foster responsibility and self-esteem, and help youth develop a stronger sense of attachment to our community.
- Tutoring – Designed to supplement classroom instruction, the Educational Intervention Program uses an individualized approach to help students achieve grade-level proficiency in reading and math, approach learning in a different way, and reach their full academic potential overall.
- Career Exploration – Participants receive support identifying, researching, and exploring their career/vocational interests. The evidence-based curriculum motivates youth to plan for their future and acquire the skills and credentials needed for career success. Whenever possible, participants are also paired with rigorously-screened volunteers to gain hands-on experience in the field.
- Personal Wellness – Interactive activities teach participants mindfulness techniques (such as breathing techniques, progressive relaxation, meditation and yoga), how to make good food choices, preventative health information, and more. Ultimately the Personal Wellness Program helps strengthen character and self-discipline, and shows youth how to channel their energies towards a positive and constructive life.
- Creative Expression – Starting with group activities and eventually expanding to activities based on individual student interest, this program engages participants in the creative process and builds confidence and self-esteem through art. Youth get the opportunity to do something positive with their time and talents, and learn how to channel their energies towards a positive outcome.
- Cultural Awareness – Many of our youth know little to nothing about the Virgin Islands’ rich cultural heritage. The Cultural Awareness Program uses fun, hands-on activities and numerous field trips to explore St. Croix’s vibrant past. Participants are introduced to the Virgin Islands’ traditional foods, music, dances, natural resources, literature, and history.
- Family Support Services – The Family Support Program links participants’ parents with needed resources. It also gives parents the tools to effectively communicate with and participate in their children’s lives. To remove barriers to participation, transportation to and from the evening meetings, a healthy meal, and child care for younger children are provided.

"Project Promise was founded on the idea that we all have a responsibility to do something to help the youth in our community," Ms. O'Reilly said. "We want to empower these students to succeed. We want them to reach their full potential, and so we decided that the best way to accomplish this goal was to utilize a holistic approach."

A Department of Education official, as well as the principal of Lew Muckle Elementary gave remarks, the first expressing DOE's gratitude towards Project Promise's dedication, and the latter, thanking the organization for choosing her school.

Mr. James spoke on behalf of the 31st Legislature, promising to do all that he could to support the organization, as well as similar local efforts. And Mr. Nelson, who won a Cruzan Gold bracelet raffled at the event last night, echoed Mr. James' commitment.

As Ms. O'Reilly continued explaining to The Consortium the various components of Project Promise, a constant stream of attendees interrupted the interview to congratulate her on what they deemed a well-thought-out program. Some even gave the nonprofit and tax-exempt group checks in a show of support.

Correction: January 24, 2015

A previous version of this article quoted Ms. O'Reilly as saying she was fired. However, Ms. O'Reilly clarified that she was not ousted, but rather laid off. The story has been updated to reflect the correct information.