

The Virgin Islands Consortium

At My Brother's Workshop, At-Risk Youth Dream Again

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ST. CROIX -- The stories they told moved the curious to tears: The lives of young men pushed off course, bitter, with seemingly no guidance to get back on track, now thrive with multiple options of success -- and hearts that are beaming with love. These young men, eight in total, were given a second chance by My Brother's Workshop on St. Croix. Originally opened in June of 2015, the facility now has a permanent home near Herbert Grigg Home for the Aged, in a facility once utilized by the Department of Human Services.

My Brother's Workshop -- a non-profit vocational training and counseling program for at-risk youth ages 16 to 24 -- has been thriving in St. Thomas for years. The organization is so well-respected there that it recently received a donation of over \$1 million, according

Senator Nereida Rivera-O'Reilly, who has been at the forefront of efforts to duplicate the program on this island.

Those who join the program learn a host of skills -- carpentry, masonry, woodworking, plumbing and more, but at its core, My Brother's Workshop embeds moral values, respect and trust, among other good qualities, led by the program's trainers, staff and volunteers.

"We have some young men who will tell you that the main thing that they've got out of the program, more than just a vocational training, is love," said Program Director Pastor John Smith on Wednesday at the facility, where repair work is still ongoing. "All of the young men agree that love is the key factor. Family has developed, trust has developed, relationships have developed -- and so it's more than just hammers and nails, more than just saws and mortar, it is really about life transformation; helping to move the guys from male to manhood, to mentors and then releasing them for their mission in life."

Mr. Smith said the program also helps the young men grow, forgive and find value in the community. He likened a typical day at My Brother's Workshop as first meeting at a table where fellowship that includes prayer and worship takes place. The group then look at



Trainer Gary McCracken, assign

My Brother's Workshop member,

Tyler Eugene (Ernice Gilbert, VIC).

Scattered around the facility working even during its open house event, the eight young men seemed at home. Some were helping erect a tent that would host visitors for a more formal gathering that would include local dignitaries on Wednesday night, while others were inside one of the facility's buildings helping install light bulbs. In fact, the young men were so occupied on Wednesday morning that Mr. Smith had to leave his interview with The Consortium to fetch Tyler Eugene, who shared his touching story of being lost and, with the support of My Brother's Workshop, found.

"I've been at the YRC (Youth Rehabilitation Center) for two years and six months, and if it wasn't for this program, I don't think I would have been going on a right path," Mr. Eugene said. This program is what's keeping me going everyday."

Mr. Eugene, who starts his day at 8:00 a.m. and leaves at 2:00 p.m. Monday thru Friday, says he learns life skills and how to look out for his peers. "Everyday we try to shed love

on one another before we start, because you need love before you start your day," he said.

For the first twelve weeks a stipend is received, followed by a minimum wage earning, now soon to be [\\$8.50 per hour](#). The program's core curriculum is construction, but as the youth progress, more specialized skills are taught.

"Our goal is to help these guys transition into a place in the community, whether it is taking the skills and certifications that they receive here into the society, but it's also to help them understand that there's so much more out here," Mr. Smith said. The pastor revealed that some of the young men have plans of starting their own businesses; dreams he said were lost when they veered off course.

[My Brother's Workshop Open House](#)

"The problem is that the path that a lot of the guys were on, they stopped dreaming, so I think what happens here is we place the jumper cables -- the mental, emotional, spiritual and vocational jumper cables -- on these guys' lives and just start them up," Mr. Smith said.

Seen traversing the grounds assuring that the event flowed seamlessly, was Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly. Her face lit with a wide smile, the four-term senator -- who revealed to The Consortium that she [would most likely not seek reelection](#) -- seemed gladdened that My Brother's Workshop was now up and running on St. Croix. She had pushed long and hard for the facility that now plays host to the program, but the senator said she will not rest until there is more financial support from the government and community that would make room for more trainers, so that more at-risk youth could be accepted. Currently, there are 14 at-risk youth on a waiting list, but the St. Croix chapter cannot accept more because it is short on funding to hire more trainers.

"I am encouraged," Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly said. "This was an effort than began in the 30th Legislature with a small appropriation, and we were able to get the St. Thomas board members to sign on to extend the program to St. Croix." The senator said the program's steering committee has been holding meetings at the current location for about a year, "and we finally see the fruits of our labor."

Those fruits are just for starters, Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly hopes. "Imagine if we could multiple this by ten, what that would do," she said.

Feature Image: From left to right: Mr. Eugene, Steven Moore, Eliston Hughes, Pastor Smith and Carlos Rivera.

Image Credit: VIC.