

The Virgin Islands Consortium

A Crowd At Capacity, An Event Well Planned, And A Ball Game Down To The Wire

Sports / **Published On July 24, 2016 10:38 AM /**

Ernice Gilbert **July 24, 2016**



ST. CROIX -- Eventgoers started pouring into the Central High School Gymnasium here at around 3:00 p.m. About two hours later, the crowd would be at capacity, as countless filled the bleachers in support of Virgin Islander and Indian Pacers NBA player Rakeem Christmas' Christmas in July affair, which included a host of charity occasions, Saturday's Charity Basketball Game being the culmination of those events this year.

From start to finish, the event was handled with intricate detail and seamless transition. The VIP section was an actual prized possession, with ticket holders being blessed with courtside seats and food service. A three-point shooting contest kicked off activities, followed by an exhilarating dunk-out contest that served as an excellent introduction to

the game itself.

And all throughout the game, the organizers included mini events that served to either honor past local ball players, or to keep the eventgoers engaged with short contests that enlisted crowd participation, with winners being awarded gifts and a picture with Mr. Christmas.

Mr. Christmas -- a freshman in the NBA -- has [set out to repair every dilapidated basketball court in the territory](#) over the next several years, an outsize initiative that sees the NBA player tackling one court at a time and enlisting the aid of the community — and his influential friends on and off the court — to help him achieve this vision.

If last night's game was any indication of the community's intention to support Mr. Christmas' efforts, it was the best signal that anyone could ask for as every seat was occupied, and organizers, at one point, had to ask attendees to abstain from venturing outside the gymnasium, as there were people on the outside trying to come in. The event took three months of planning, and was helmed locally by Sheniko Frett, the direct assistant to Amira Hamid-Joseph, Mr. Christmas' aunt and manager, who is also the head of the Rakeem Christmas Foundation.

Even elected officials participated, more specifically Senators Kurt Vialet and Sammuel Sanes, who competed against each other in a three-point shooting contest, with Mr. Vialet emerging the winner with his first shot. His win came after first hustling to put on basketball shorts at one end of the court, running to the other end to grab and put on a jersey, and then running back to the the other end for an attempt at a three-point shot.

Governor Kenneth Mapp was also present for a portion of the game. He was seen interacting with Mr. Christmas.

Taking the event to its highest level was the actual friendly basketball game between St. Croix and St. Thomas. With topnotch narrating by Kevin Sheppard, it started with St. Croix appearing to be dominant, but went down to the wire with St. Croix holding a 1 point lead. The home team was able to pull away in the final seconds to secure its 73-65 win.

But both sides played well. And both sides demonstrated that there are indeed more basketball greats to come from the Virgin Islands.

"The proceeds we get from the events go towards building and repairing all the courts here and in St. Thomas," Mr. Christmas told The Consortium Monday of the Charity Basketball Game event held yesterday. "I'm going to try to do one each year. We're going to try our best and see what happens from there." He brought two of his former Syracuse teammates, who now play in the NBA themselves, to boost the event.

The Fort Frederick basketball court will be the first to undergo repairs, he said.

Prior to Saturday's culmination, Mr. Christmas held basketball clinics in conjunction with the Boys & Girls Club in St. Croix and St. Thomas. He said part of his efforts in the territory is to help steer the youth away from gun violence, which has remained stubborn for years.

“You just have to keep your head straight and have an open mind. You have to go out there and do what you love and everything will fall into place. I had no idea that all this would happen to me. I just kept my head on, focused on school and just tried to do my best and everything fell into place for me,” he said.

Mr. Christmas said those who are being pushed to get involve in illicit activities by troublemakers, should remember the importance of school. Recounting his own years of education, Mr. Christmas stressed the importance of staying in school and actually learning.

“School is the main thing. Ain’t no need for violence. You just have to keep your head on and go out there and do what you have to do,” he said.

His ultimate goal, as is arguably the case with every ring-less NBA player, is to win a championship; a that target stays on the forefront of Mr. Christmas’ mind.

[View the original embedded media](#)