

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Ag-Discovery 2016 Brings 19 Exchange Students To Territory

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ST. CROIX -- The University of the Virgin Islands in conjunction with U.S. Department of Agriculture are currently implementing their "Ag-Discovery 2016" program, which was designed to introduce high school students to career opportunities in agriculture. On Tuesday, 19 transfer students from across the mainland, who are residing in UVI dorms until Saturday, visited the Arthur A. Richards Junior High School's Future Farmers Of America (F.F.A.) program, where they helped with gardening, cleaning eggs and other agriculture-based activities.

Louis E. Petersen, Jr., assistant director for U.V.I.'s Cooperative Extensive Service for the St. Thomas-St. John district, who also has some territorial responsibilities, said the

program has been in existence since 2002, and funded by U.S.D.A.'s Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS). Mr. Petersen said only Universities can apply for the grant.

"The whole purpose of the program is to prepare, encourage and introduce high school students to the fields and career paths in agriculture," he said. Mr. Peterseen revealed that UVI is now part of a 20-university network around the U.S., allowing students to apply to attend any of the 20 universities to be part of the program, initiated during summers.

He said Ag-Discovery 2016 is a win-win for the territory, as exchange students visiting the islands for the program could serve as USVI ambassadors of sorts, based on their experience while here. "It's a partnership, it's a team, and it benefits us not just in the here and now but beyond," he said. "Because if a student engages in Ag-Discovery at another university and finishes here in the twelfth grade, he or she already has a contact, a link elsewhere to propel further into this academic career."

Mr. Petersen said at least 60 students applied to be at UVI this year for the program, but it was capped at 20 for what he described as management reasons. And he noted that over the years, youngsters in the territory have been taught to view agriculture as an industry with few opportunities, when there are actually over 300 career choices in said sector.

"Generally speaking, we tell them that it's about production agriculture in the field producing, which is an important part, but not the only part," Mr. Petersen said. "And what that tends to do sometimes is discourage youngsters, because they don't tend to look at agriculture with a high level of respect."

Because of this, UVI introduces agriculture to students first as being a science, since students respect the subject, as well as a business, which students also respect, Mr. Petersen said.

He said UVI would use the two-week program to give the students a full agricultural experience, including hands-on activities and visits to farm sites. The students have also enjoyed some local culture and history of the territory.

UVI applied for and received about \$53,000, Mr. Petersen made known. "And I'm of the opinion that if we continue to do a good job of implementing and reporting, the funds will continue to come in," he said.

The students said they've enjoyed the experience and have learned many lessons that would be applied to their own programs when they return to their respective schools.

"My biggest takeaway from here will be how much we don't know about territories," said Elissa Jessen, an exchange student from Moriarty, Nex Mexico. "Since we're from the states we don't necessarily know what's going on in the territories, and learning about the culture, how they grow things, how they feed, and people are very interesting to me, and I think that it's going to help me expand my knowledge."

Their career choices were divergent, with Nyomi Mendez, another exchange student seeking to become an agricultural lawyer, and Ms. Jessen aiming to become a marine

biologist and veterinarian. Ms. Jessen is hoping to get into UVI's marine program in St. Thomas.

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