

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Project Promise, Already Greatly Impacting St. Croix, Launches Youth Recognition Effort

VIC News / **Published On January 22, 2017 02:49 PM /**

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The late afternoon's weather on Saturday couldn't be more perfect as group of about 100 people -- business owners, government officials, well-wishers and others -- all dressed in white, stood in line while waiting to be seated at the beachfront of the Carambola Beach Resort for Project Promise's first annual Youth Recognition Event, *an all white beach affair*.

They came to be part of Founder and Program Director of Project Promise, Resa O'Reilly's latest effort, after being encouraged by the exceptional job Ms. O'Reilly and her team have managed with Project Promise's inaugural initiative, dubbed the [Caterpillar Project](#), which sees the nonprofit supporting in multiple ways 12 at-risk fifth grade

students from the Lew Muckle Elementary School, through high school and college. The initiative has been a smashing success. At least one student has made honor roll, while others have seen marked improvements in multiple areas. These students were honored last night, with their names being called out one by one as they made their way to a stage, while the audience cheered them on.

The Consortium has witnessed firsthand some of the activities that Project Promise offers the children. A Consortium reporter followed the group last year on a hike up the Caledonia Gut to a waterfall, where students were taught the history of the area along the way.

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Yet, while the elementary school students were recognized for their improvements, yesterday's gathering came to witness the birth of another Project Promise venture: A youth recognition event geared towards high school seniors, "who have gone above and beyond and excelled despite all odds," according to the event's pamphlet. Dubbed the Excellence and Leadership Recognition Award, candidates must come from the public school system and possess a 3.2 GPA average. They must also demonstrate integrity in the face of adversity, among other criteria.

Among the honorees last night were Heakey Ramos, a St. Croix Career and Technical Education Center student; Ameera Mustafa, a St. Croix Education Complex student; and Jahmanie Morton, who attends the St. Croix Central High School. Each student received an award from the Department of Labor, gift certificate from the Dept. of Consumer and Licensing Affairs, and a brand new laptop from the Department of Education.



Virgin Islands recording artist Pressure Busspipe takes picture with Project Promise children. (Credit: Malek Bascombe)

Enamored by the accomplishments and goals of Project Promise, local leaders spoke of the community's indebtedness to the nonprofit, as it continues to invest in the future of the territory -- its children.

"I'd like to say thank you on behalf of the governor for Project Promise, for Resa O'Reilly and for you having the vision," said St. Croix Administrator Stephanie Williams, speaking on behalf of the governor. She also thanked sponsors of the effort.

"We're really excited about being able to partner with Ms. O'Reilly, and she has been pushing us along the years to make sure that this comes to fruition," said St. Croix Insular Superintendent Colleen Mae Williams, representing the Department of Education.

Former Senate President Neville James reminisced on the inaugural Project Promise event, and said that the Senate's commitment to support Ms. O'Reilly's efforts was a sound one that would continue. Also present was current Senate President Myron Jackson, who lauded the program and vowed his support.

Ms. O'Reilly is known to put together elegant, well organized events, and yesterday's affair -- which followed Project Promise's first fundraiser in September 2016, [a 1930's-era cocktail party](#) -- was no exception.

It began with soothing steel pan music by Kevin Williams, Jr., who remedied the souls of attendees with a mix of Caribbean and pop instrumentals, prompting applause. The event also included a \$1,000 raffle, and climaxed with a performance from the territory's number 1 recording artist, [Pressure Busspipe](#).

"Oh my goodness!" That's all I can say. It has been totally amazing. From the honor roll student and the improvements seen in each of them, I feel totally grateful and my mind is blown," Ms. O'Reilly told The Consortium last night. She went on to thank the sponsors, stating, "Everybody has just joined forces to help us get this together, and we are really grateful for their support."

As if to stress the importance of Ms. O'Reilly's work, former executive director of the Caribbean Dance Company, Jill Wilson, spoke of the sacrifice that involves running a nonprofit, with an aim of impressing upon the hearts of attendees how crucial their continued backing of Project Promise is.

"I have a unique perspective because I ran a nonprofit and 501c3 in this community for three decades, which was Caribbean Dance Company, and I have to say that I am so deeply proud of Resa and this endeavor that she's undertaken," Ms. Wilson said. "It's very challenging to run a nonprofit in a community that is as challenged and as complicated as our community is. For someone to make a commitment to giveback to our community is quite rare because running a nonprofit, you have to be crazy. You have to be insane, you have to be passionate, and you have to be willing to put your life on the line everyday in order to provide this service that you want, and that the community so desperately needs."

Feature Image: Atop: Youth Recognition Event honorees pose for a photo with Project Promise board members. Below: Project Promise's Caterpillar students pose for a photo with Project Promise board members. (Credit: Malek Bascombe).

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