

The Virgin Islands Consortium

O'Reilly-Bates Named 2020 St. Croix District Teacher of the Year

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Ricardo Richards Elementary School Teacher Zahra O'Reilly-Bates was named St. Croix's 2020 District Teacher of the Year at a ceremony held October 16 at Gertrude's Restaurant in recognition of the four candidates vying for the top teacher spot in the district, the Dept. of Education has announced. As part of her appreciation package, O'Reilly-Bates received a seven-day Caribbean cruise for two, courtesy of the V. I. Department of Tourism and an anonymous donor.

O'Reilly-Bates, a product of the Virgin Islands public education system and a graduate of the University of the Virgin Islands, has been teaching since 2002. She clinched the top teacher spot in the district after receiving 559 points out of 620 following an evaluation of

her application, a one-on-one interview and review of her credentials by an independent panel of judges.

During her remarks, O'Reilly-Bates—who has held many important roles throughout her career, including working as a Teacher-Ranger-Teacher of Christiansted National Historic Site, where she developed a geocache that has earned the distinction of 'Find Your Park' Geotour and resulted in hundreds of visitors to the site—proclaimed her passion for children, teaching and learning, D.O.E. said.

"My belief is quite simple, 'What I want for my own children, I want for all children,'" she said, adding, "and that is the absolute best."

St. Croix's top teacher further expressed her gratitude to her parents, children, extended family and spouse, even offering a special message to her students.

"I say thank you for trusting me," she began. "I see you, I hear you, I get you, I appreciate you. For it is because of you, my passion for teaching and learning continues to shine."

Department of Education Commissioner Racquel Berry-Benjamin told the packed room of district officials, school principals, teachers, union leaders and Board of Education representatives that the annual recognition of teachers is an important time of year.

"The Teacher of the Year program is one of the most prestigious honors in education that focuses public attention on excellence in teaching," she said.

The commissioner went on to say that while teachers are held accountable for the academic success of students, teachers "are successful when their instructional practice is built on a foundation of care."

"Without care," Berry-Benjamin pointed out, "learning does not take place. Every successful teacher knows this by experience. Teachers have a special purpose in life—to plant seeds—seeds that burst into rich, bountiful trees that bear fruit that nourishes the mind, body and soul of others."

Berry-Benjamin thanked the honorees for "demonstrating excellence in your craft. Thank you for raising the bar, challenging your students, but most importantly, caring for them."

St. Croix District Insular Superintendent Carlos McGregor praised the teachers for "coming in early and leaving late," a testament, he said, to their dedication and professionalism. In his personal reflections on each of the candidates, McGregor concluded that they are all deserving of the honor of District Teacher of the Year.

Teacher Union President Rosa Soto-Thomas commended the teachers for continuing to serve their students and their schools well above what is expected and often with limited resources. Board of Education Secretary Winona Hendricks acknowledged the teachers' excellent performance and the lengths they take to ensure students are being held to the highest academic standards.

The afternoon was punctuated by acapella vocal performances, two of which included the Virgin Islands March and the National Anthem, by St. Croix Central High School's Golden Voices ensemble, under the direction of music teacher, Sacha Alexander. The

Educational Complex High School JROTC opened the ceremony with the customary posting of the colors.

O'Reilly-Bates concluded her remarks with a special note of appreciation to her peers.

"To my fellow nominees, I say congratulations," she said. "We are all deserving of this honor. So, let us continue to care enough and leave our children with a better, safer and fairer and enriched world. Teaching is our purpose."

At the end of a one-year term, both O'Reilly-Bates and Michaelrose Ravalier, the St. Thomas-St. John 2020 District Teacher of the Year, will compete for the V.I. State Teacher of the Year title to represent the territory on the national level.

Other 2020 St. Croix District Teacher of the Year finalists included Jordan Albany of Pearl B. Larsen Elementary School, Ericka Hansen of St. Croix Central High School and Joann Lewis of St. Croix Educational Complex High School.

Carla A. Bastian, Ed.D., St. Croix deputy superintendent, served as mistress of ceremony and coordinator of the District Teacher of the Year program.