

The Virgin Islands Consortium

SCEC Students Hold Conversation On Self-Identity At Whim Museum As Part Of Centennial Commemoration

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ST. CROIX -- Five St. Croix Educational Complex High School students explored the topic of self-identity in an in-depth panel discussion titled, "A Conversation on Self Identity: The Effects of Colonialism and Perceptions Over the Last 100 Years," held March 23 at Whim Museum as part of the museum's commemoration of the March 31 Transfer Centennial, according to the Department of Education.

The discussion was a precursor to the students' planned visit to Denmark from March 25-31, 2017 as part of a UNESCO-supported Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Collaboration Project conducted with other high school students in Denmark. While visiting the territory's former colonial owner, the students will participate in two conferences, as well

as showcase their exhibit on the atrocities of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade at Copenhagen's City Hall.

The two-hour discussion was the first of its kind in Whim Museum's history. According to Sonia Jacobs Dow, executive director of the St. Croix Landmarks Society, which operates the Whim Museum, it was the first time students curated, researched and constructed an exhibit at the historic museum. Before the discussion got underway, attendees received a guided tour of the exhibit, which was constructed by a total of 16 students.

In his opening statement, student Aaron Nickie, Jr., presented the audience with a series of thought-provoking questions.

"Identity has different aspects. When we look at identity, we can talk about identity in terms of religion, culture or self-identity--'Who am I as a person?' 'Who are you as an individual'," he said. "A lot of time, when we talk about identity as African Americans, it has to go back to our ancestors. But, there are so many questions. How far back do we go in figuring out who we are as our identity? We can go back to the plantations, we can go back to Africa before the enslavement period, but what aspects of our identity are we claiming as our own? What is important to us and how far back do we go to figure out who we are as individuals?"

Each student had the opportunity to share his or her insights on the topic of self-identity. Student Habeeba O'Neill stated, "We have to confront our past in order to assess our identity. If we can't accept wholly who we were once, then we cannot move on from that."

To that, Nickie suggested that a person's identity can be influenced by any number of factors. "At different ages and at different cultural perspectives, identity won't be [the same] for everyone. Depending on location or background, we have different perspectives of identity, particularly when it comes to our colonial history."

Student Keshawn Hardy chimed in, questioning how deeply one should go to discover one's identity. "Identity has to do with the history we know and the history that we don't know. How far can we go with our history?"

Student Chelsea Valery said identity should not be viewed as solely an individual concept, rather, she said it is tied to one's ancestry. "Along with self-identity, there is also that aspect of you being influenced by your people," she began. "When I say 'your people,' I mean your ancestors--those who came before you. So, when you have colonial history, our people went through such a horrible ordeal, we can also characterize our identity as being linked to [our ancestors]."

Yet, one student suggested that the notion of self-identity can be confusing at times, particularly for people with multiple racial or ethnic backgrounds. "People are confused, very confused when it comes to self-identity," said Ammiel Francis. "Some people may say, 'Hey, my ancestors weren't slaves, my family came from Puerto Rico, Colorado or St. Lucia'. But, they are still confused with determining who they are because although history is very important, at times, that history can be disconnected." Francis went on to explain that due to his own background--his mother is Puerto Rican and his father is St. Lucian--not being able to know more about his family's history because both his great

grandparents are deceased contributes to the disconnectedness he sometimes feels.

Advisor Duane Howell praised the students' hard work and bravery in presenting the topic and fielding questions from audience members. He pointed out that the students' journey to Denmark is the second such trip St. Croix students have made since he became the UNESCO liaison in the Virgin Islands six years ago. As part of the on-going collaboration, Danish students visit the territory up to two times per year. The students will attend a conference on global citizenship as well as one that takes a look at the 1917 sale of the Danish West Indies to the United States of America and the effects 100 years later.

Dr. Lauren Larsen, Anika Johnson and Zarah O'Rielly are also advisors to the group.

Feature Image: Hardy and Nickie, Jr. give guests tour of Trans Atlantic Slave Trade exhibit. (Credit: D.O.E.)