

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Sterling Optical Expands Operation With Brand New 3,000 Square-Foot Facility

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ST. CROIX -- Sterling Optical is a household name in the U.S. Virgin Islands. Talk about eye care, or the need for glasses, and the company is almost universally named as the business to visit. It boasts over 36,00 customers in a territory of just over 100,000; a monumental feat that took years to accomplish.

Yet, in a room housing a brand new eye care machine, the operation's co-founder, Dr. Lisa Adams, spoke with humility about the company's beginnings during an interview preceding a ribbon-cutting event at the company's new 3,000 square-foot facility -- adjacent to the old location -- and proudly about its well documented giveback efforts to the community through its scholarship program.

The company was founded in July of 1997 by Dr. Joel Mahepath and Dr. Adams, who got married around the same time. Two years later they opened an operation in St. Thomas, and two years after in Puerto Rico (the Puerto Rico operation is now shuttered due to the island's faltering economy).

According to Dr. Adams, Sterling Optical offers complete exams, checking for diseases such as glaucoma and cataract. She said things really took off when they started offering a \$99 package; which was made possible through legislation from former senators Adelbert Bryan and Usie Richards with the aim to break a monopoly that had existed. It included a complete eye exam, glasses prescription, and it also came with a fashion frame and single-vision polycarbonate lense -- one of the strongest lenses on the market, Dr. Adams said.

"Never before in the Virgin Islands did people have such a package. You can literally get a complete eye exam with a pair of glasses that is fashionable for \$99, so we broke a monopoly with that deal," Dr. Adams said, adding that the deal still exists today, as she stressed the importance of helping all classes of people.

The company employs 8 individuals on St. Croix and 3 in St. Thomas. Dr. Adams calls the new space, with its affluent look, Fifth Avenue on St. Croix. "No where else would you see chandeliers besides Fifth Avenue in New York," she said. Aside from its beauty, however, the new space comes with more services and new equipment.

Dr. Adams also spoke about the company's scholarship program, which has given over \$250,000 since its inception to students heading off to college.

"Education is a big part of both Joel and myself. Because of education, we can do what we do. We've traveled the world, and so we feel that we have to give back to others in the community to have that opportunity," she said.

Moments following her interview with The Consortium, the formal ceremony began, which included a variety of guests -- patients, employees and dignitaries, among them a host of senators and Governor Kenneth Mapp.

Mr. Mapp hailed the expansion as a sign that St. Croix's economy is improving, and he commended Dr. Adams and Dr. Mahepath for investing in the territory.

Senator Neville James spoke of a soft spot in his heart for businesses that withstood the energy crisis that he said undermined many businesses. "If you opened in 1997, that means 6-7 years into your business, your WAPA bill started to undermine your ability to function. Not to make money; to function," Mr. James said.

Dr. Mahepath expressed gratitude to those in attendance, and thanked God for the "ability to dream and make those dreams a reality." He read a verse of scripture, "This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it." And he expressly thanked his wife who is also his business partner for twenty years, for showing him love and patience.

Sterling Optical is a franchise whose parent company is Emerging Vision. There are 114 locations across the U.S. and its territories, with the USVI operation consistently ranking in the top five in regards to total business, according to Cathy O'Connor, director of franchise support.

Ms. O'Connor said she listened to local leaders who spoke of the downturn of the St. Croix economy following the closure of HOVENSA, and went back to the books looking to see if she'd notice a change in Sterling Optical's volume during that time.

"I actually went back and looked historically at the numbers last night just to make sure, and I was like, 'When was the downturn?' And the truth of the matter is, I would not be able to identify what year that would be, because of the consistency of their business," Ms. O'Connor said.

Feature Image: Dr. Adams and Governor Mapp cut ribbon at grand opening ceremony of Sterling Optical's new facility in Golden Rock on Tuesday. (Credit: Ernice Gilbert, VIC)

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