

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Turning Lemon Into Lemonade: St. Croix Native Beats Odds To Graduate In U.S. College At Top Of Class

Education / **Published On May 16, 2017 08:12 PM /**

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What do you do when, one week before school commences, you're told that your in-state application to attend the college of your dreams has been denied because of residency compliance reasons? How do you cope after almost miraculously being accepted into another institution of higher learning the same week, to learn that your mom -- your sole funding source -- had lost her leg in a vehicular accident?

The odds facing Dajah Denis were great, and would be enough cause for many students to give up. But she did not; instead, the now 20-year-old braved through adversity to top her graduating class Summa Cum Laude, earning a perfect 4.0 GPA.

Ms. Denis [shared her story on social media](#), and it was brought to The Consortium's attention with hopes that the publication would tell her story. In a single read-through, it was clear that Ms. Denis's journey would serve as an inspiration to many, and also as a proud moment for the Virgin Islands, whose students continue to excel outside the territory in a myriad of academic fields.

"I feel proud of myself. I feel like I accomplished all the goals that I wanted to. It's kind of shocking a little bit -- it's just like wow, it actually happened," Ms. Denis told The Consortium.

Her improbable story began in the summer of 2015. She had just graduated from Riverside High School in Durham N.C., where she completed her junior and senior years, and was determined to attend the North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University because of its robust business program. She was also motivated to apply because a friend attended there, and had relayed positive reviews of the institution. Her grades in high school were high throughout, so being accepted at NC A&T University was not difficult, except Ms. Denis was accepted as an out-of-state student even after she provided all the information the university requested to prove that she had lived in the state for the required time. The out-of-state classification caused her would-be tuition fees to rise exponentially -- from about \$13,000 to thousands more.



more and it was just like, oh my god," she said.

Brantley Award

Compounding the problem, Ms. Denis received notification from the university of its decision to classify her as an out-of-state student one week before school was set to start -- and even after she had been seeking confirmation about the university's decision three months prior.

Scrambling for alternatives, Ms. Denis remembered a friend who was attending Louisburg College -- also in North Carolina -- which offered a two-year associate degree program. Encouraged by her supportive mother to call the institution, Ms. Denis did just that and was accepted the same day. The college was also able to help Ms. Denis in securing scholarship funds, which came about easily because of her high grades from high school.

"From there, everything fell into place," Ms. Denis said, stating that she got into the school's honor program because of her continuous high academic scores, which kept the scholarship dollars coming.

Yet, just when it seemed like her situation had stabilized, Ms. Denis received the devastating news that her mother -- her main source of college funding -- had lost her leg after being struck by a vehicle.

Ms. Denis said she became depressed. "I never had something that depressed me so much," she said, adding that it was even more difficult to cope because she was not on St. Croix with her mom when the incident occurred.

But her mother, who Ms. Denis said has been strict about education from the onset, encouraged her to keep her grades up, stating that she was happy to be alive, and that everything would be okay. Ms. Denis's success was also important to her mother on a symbolic level; Ms. Denis would be the first one in her family to graduate from college.

Also at the back of Ms. Denis's mind, was the reality of her situation. Her mother had just lost a leg, making it impossible to provide her daughter with financial support in the near-term. The only route, then, was to continue performing exceptionally well -- which would keep the scholarship funds coming. With her mother's encouragement, and a do-or-die reality before her, Ms. Denis continued pushing, and the results were exceptional -- enough to motivate Virgin Islanders, and anyone who hears her story.

"Along with being an honors student, I was accepted into the national honor society, Phi Theta Kappa. That same year I competed in the 2016 Phi Beta Lambda Business State and National conferences where I competed against famous schools across the country and won 1st place in Emerging Business Issues at both levels. At the end of freshman year, because of my grades and need, I was awarded with the alumni scholarship that was given to four rising sophomores," Ms. Denis revealed.

Speaking of her accomplishments in her sophomore year, Ms. Denis said, "In April, I competed in the 2017 Phi Beta Lambda Business Conference, and won 1st place in Social Media Marketing. As a result, I will be traveling to California this summer to compete on the national level. On Louisburg College Awards Day 2017, I was awarded with the Malone Award (for Highest Excellence in the Field of English), the Outstanding Phi Beta Lambda Member Award, and the Speech Communication Award (for Excellence in the Area of Speech Communication). I was also inducted and gave a speech at the induction of the National Society of Leadership and Success. Now, I just graduated from Louisburg College Summa Cum Laude. At graduation, I was awarded with the Allen P. Brantley award for having the Highest GPA of the graduating class. Also, I was the only Spring 2017 graduate with a perfect 4.0 GPA which I maintained every semester."

Ms. Denis's next goal is to earn her bachelors degree in marketing and finance. She said she has received multiple acceptance letters, including scholarships, but as of Monday was still weighing her options.

Once done with college, Ms. Denis will embark on starting her own business. "I'm trying to work for myself," she said. She intends to launch her own fashion brand with franchises across the U.S., " and hopefully back home too," she concluded.

