

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Cancer Survivors Celebrate Life, Memorialize Those Who've Passed At St. Croix's 16th Annual Relay For Life

Health / **Published On May 21, 2017 11:08 AM /**

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ST. CROIX -- Virgin Islanders who assembled at the D.C. Canegata Baseball Stadium on Saturday were not the field's usual gathering. An array of tents lined the edges of the park, representing multiple organizations -- public, private and even nonprofits -- all in support of a mission dear to the territory's residents and people across the world: the enduring fight against cancer, and the end goal of finding a cure.

It was the island's 16th Annual Relay for Life event, which is usually held at the St. Croix Educational Complex's track and field facility, but ongoing repairs forced a change of

venue. The new location, however, appears to have worked out even better than the traditional site; at D.C. Canegata, the lighting is much better, the stadium itself is more event-ready, and it's also better secured.

And it made for a glorious walk of life by cancer survivors at sundown -- one of the most important segments of Relay for Life. As the deejay cued [I Know Who I Am](#) from singer Sinach -- an uplifting gospel song that speaks of self-confidence because of God's protection and favor -- survivors began their walk around the field. They included young, middle-age and older Virgin Islanders, all who had either completely won the battle against cancer, or were in the middle of the fight of their lives.

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They walked defiantly, too, their morale boosted by hundreds of supporters with loud cheers while circling the field. As they made their way to the center of the facility, the song -- which had changed from I Know Who I Am to [Say Yes](#) by Michelle Williams -- had again switched to a more celebratory tune: [Celebration](#), by Kool and the Gang. Supporters were asked to join the survivors in the center as a show of unity against the disease, and as an undying buttress to those still fighting.

Later came the Luminary Ceremony, where candles are lit in remembrance of those who've lost the fight against cancer, and in honor of survivors.

Earlier in the day, Relay for Life and American Cancer Society (A.C.S.) officials spoke of the importance of the event, as well as the strong community support -- both financially and otherwise -- it has received over the years.

"This is the biggest fundraiser for the American Cancer Society," said Dr. Samuel Hughes of A.C.S. "The staff is merely the support mechanism; I'm looking at the heart and soul of what the American Cancer Society in the Virgin Islands is in front of me, and that's survivors, their families, and those who support them and surround them with love."

The teams with tents at Relay for Life were to start raising funds prior to the actual event, with the highest fundraiser being recognized at the closing ceremony. At Relay for Life, teams must have a consistent presence walking around the field, as, according to A.C.S., cancer never sleeps. Members take turns walking, and teams continue to raise funds until the event's closing.

Dr. Hughes said money raised at Relay for Life help Virgin Islands patients directly, to include medical supplies and even transportation. Last year, \$127,000 in direct financial assistance was given to cancer patients in the territory, Dr. Hughes made known. The local chapter of A.C.S. also provided a \$50,000 grant to the Community Foundation of the Virgin Islands, to provide medical needs to locals that A.C.S.'s policy does not cover, he said. A.C.S. has also partnered with the East Medical Center on St. Thomas as well as Frederiksted Health Care, in providing more assistance to cancer patients territory-wide.

Limetree Bay supported the cause with \$20,000 this year, Dr. Hughes said. He also thanked the Mapp administration and the 31st Legislature, which supported with a grant of \$37,522. The government continue to support the American Cancer Society in many ways, Dr. Hughes added, among them the use of its facilities to host events.

Governor Kenneth Mapp, who also attended, pledged his continued support, and highlighted his administration's efforts in getting the federal government to [expand Medicaid benefits to Virgin Islanders](#). "Next year our dollars will go from \$13 million to \$27.9 million directly for Medical care for the vulnerable section of our community," Mr. Mapp said. He also acknowledged Senator Nereida Rivera-O'Reilly, who sponsored legislation to provide mammograms for young women in the community, for early detection and intervention of cancer.

Cancer survivors spoke to The Consortium about life after surviving. They also gave advice to people currently battling the deadly disease.

"My thing when diagnosed was that I'm not going to change anything, I'm not going to do anything differently. I'm going to continue living my life the way I want to live my life," said cancer survivor Jovan Augustine, 25, who was diagnosed at age 13. He encouraged those currently battling the disease to stay strong, adding that the fight against cancer is winnable. "Don't change. Just live [your life] like you were living it before," he said.

Petra Mathew, also a cancer survivor, said hopefulness, thankfulness and prayer were three key elements of her successful battle, adding, "Don't feel afraid or like you're all alone, there are a lot of people who've gone through cancer before. They have survived and they are making it well in life. All you have to do is be hopeful and optimistic that everything's going to be okay."

The event comes to a close today.