

The Virgin Islands Consortium

St. Thomas Native In Maryland Leads Successful Hurricane Relief Drive Dubbed 'Operation Strength And Unity'

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ST. THOMAS -- The unprecedented ravaging Hurricanes Irma and Maria motivated people from far and near to mobilize and engage in tremendous humanitarian relief efforts. Whether having visited the U.S. Virgin Islands (USVI) and now consider it home; having heard about the beautiful American Paradise for the first time; or having been born and raised on one of the four USVI, but live on the mainland, people are using their resources to be a part of the greater good following the aftermath of these two devastating hurricanes. Small organizations and individuals are doing their part to mobilize through relief efforts at similar pace as the large and medium organizations who

have far more financial resources to do so. In fact, Virgin Islanders across the United States are fundraising, collecting, contributing, packing, shipping, and even flying to the USVI to ensure direct outcome and impactful relief efforts

One of these known individuals is D. Deborah Jones of Bowie, Maryland. Ms. Jones is a St. Thomas native who lives in Bowie. Immediately following the catastrophic Irma which ravaged through several Lesser Antilles islands, including the USVI, Ms. Jones could be found working with her local church, The Bridge, to bring awareness of the devastation of Irma to major networks. Ms. Jones took her efforts a step further and organized the "Hurricane Irma Relief Funds". The response to her efforts was enormous—so much so, The Bridge joined forces with her to expand her efforts beyond monetary contributions to include contributions of needed items for individuals affected by the hurricane.

Donors and contributors, including JBS International, showed their expressions of humanitarianism and contributed at a rate that allowed Ms. Jones to travel via Delta with ten packed boxes with necessary items to conduct a drive on St. Thomas. Operation Strength and Unity Giveaway was held in partnership with Vive, Inc., of St. Thomas on September 30, at the Yacht Haven Grand Marina. The event began with a free Zumba class by Ms. Gaynel Harris, Vive, Inc., followed by distribution of over 100 supply kits containing an LED lantern with batteries, toiletries (toothpaste, toothbrush, soap, deodorant, and lotion), Tylenol and Advil, insect repellent, packages of tuna, water, and nutritional drink. Additional items distributed at the drive included flashlights, disposable diapers and baby wipes, feminine hygiene products, battery operated radios, and over 2,000 batteries of all sizes.

Phase I of Operation Strength & Unity proved to be a success as the expressions on every face affirm their appreciation as each supply kit exchanged from volunteers' hands to residents' hands. With immense appreciation, random residents independently contacted WSTA to express their gratitude to Ms. Jones who traveled the distance to demonstrate VI pride and strength through her generous hurricane relief drive. Among the grateful was the Honorable Judge Audrey Thomas, who personally thanked Ms. Jones even after her return from St. Thomas.

When asked about her experience, Ms. Jones said, "I'm moved by the fact the people gave to allow me to do this." What seems like a small wonder is indeed a benefit to those whose lives were touched by the heart of this VI native. Ms. Jones continues to run her donation drive and looks forward to her Phase II of Operation Strength & Unity Giveaway, targeting a specific population.

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