

The Virgin Islands Consortium

At D.O.E.'s 'Stress Relief' Concert, Resiliency Through Music

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ST. CROIX -- The Sunday afternoon sky went from cloudy to sunny and cloudy again, a process that would reoccur until the sun went down, as if the day was unable to make up its mind about what it should be.

But that was not the case for the multiple music bands -- comprised mostly of students -- that gathered yesterday at the Sunny Isle Ampitheater for four hours of music, playing everything from Jazz to steelpan, and UVI choir singers rousing the atmosphere with heartwarming songs that pleased all in attendance.

It was the Department of Education, Division of Music Education and the Division of Cultural Education's "Stress Relief Concert", which was put on to convey the resiliency of the territory's students and its people, even after being struck by two Category 5 hurricanes, as well as to bring stress relief to residents as they continue to live in a drastically changed reality -- no power for most, a diminished population, lost jobs, destroyed homes and other untold adverse situations.

While the groups performed and the crowd cheered on, The Consortium spoke with D.O.E.'s Territorial Director of Music, Dionne Donadelle, for background on the music affair. She explained that the event was three-pronged: to remind students that they must keep pushing forward, boost educators' morale, and uplift Virgin Islanders.

"I needed something for the children to realize that we have to continue and we must move forward, and at the same time motivate my educators to keep pushing because it was a lot to deal with one after the other," Ms. Donadelle said, referring to the storms. The director, who held a similar event in the St. Thomas-St. John District, said she teamed up with Director of Cultural Education Valrica Bryson, who Ms. Donadelle lauded for assembling a respectable roster of talent for the show. "I'm just so proud of the fact that we came together to show the community that we are willing to do a lot and continue to move forward," Ms. Donadelle said.

As for the territory's residents, Ms. Donadelle described Virgin Islanders as strong. "We should never second-guess ourselves. We are always people who will rise just like the phoenix; it's just something that we're going to do as Caribbean people."

According to the Dept. of Education, hundreds of transcripts were submitted for students moving to the U.S. mainland with their families. And after being short of 120 teachers before the storms struck, D.O.E lost an additional 150 employees following Hurricanes Irma and Maria, according to Sharon McCollum, the department's commissioner, speaking at a [Senate hearing last week](#).

But for Ms. Donadelle and Ms. Bryson -- both have served in D.O.E. for years and have dedicated their lives to the educational advancement of the territory's children -- leaving the USVI was never an option.

"It's home and nobody can come and take my home away from me," said Ms. Donadelle. "They will not run me from here because I'm not going anywhere."

Ms. Bryson echoed Ms. Donadelle's sentiments. She reminisced on her childhood and the teachers who she described as "great instructors," and the impact their dedication has had on her life. Now, Ms. Bryson sees no other way but to pay it forward, and has spent 32 years as an educator. "You want to emulate the good that they have done and carry it forward," she said. "We must always propel our students forward. A lot of time we talk about the wrong that they do, but when they do good where are you?"

And about staying home instead of leaving for opportunities elsewhere, Ms. Bryson bucked at the thought. "What! First of all, you know I love the Virgin Islands; that's the most important thing. This is my home, regardless of what, this is my home," she said.

Groups that performed at the function included the St. Croix Unity Band, Concert Band and Steel Ensemble, the University of the Virgin Islands' Voices of Inspiration, and the

Maillard Brothers.

The event was free and sponsored in part by the Sunny Isle management office.

Feature Image: Sacha Alexander plays the flute during Sunday's "Stress Relief" concert at the Sunny Isle Amphitheater. (Ernice Gilbert, VIC)

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