

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Editorial | UVI Is Rising

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The University of the Virgin Islands, St. Croix Campus

I had the honor of previewing a documentary entitled “Tell Them We Are Rising” which is a compelling and seminal history of the contributions of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) to the ideals of social justice movement in the United States. In addition to the enormous educational contributions these institutions have made to this society, their students and faculty have served, and continue to serve, as a catalyst for social reforms that make equality and justice a closer reality, though still an elusive ideal.

The title, “Tell Them We Are Rising” immediately resonated with me as President of the University of the Virgin Islands (UVI), because a couple of months before viewing the

film, UVI, the only HBCU outside of the mainland, was struck by two category five hurricanes within a two week period. Winds of 185 miles per hour swept through our campuses on St. Thomas and St. Croix and left trails of devastation and destruction. Our beautiful and scenic campuses looked like war zones once these forces of nature passed through our midst. Ten buildings across both campuses were uninhabitable, which meant that faculty members lost their offices, students were deprived of classrooms and laboratories, a treasured residence hall, and so many aspects of college life they took for granted were no longer present. The estimated damage to our campuses range between \$60 - \$80 million.

The theme we embraced in order to make sense out of catastrophe was "UVI Will Rise." None of us had heard of the film so this theme came from the depths of our collective consciousness. From our souls emerged the same spirit that had propelled HBCUs for generations. It is a spirit that defies the odds and faces challenges with resilience and creativity. We even created a UVI Rise Relief Fund to support the needs of our students and employees, which has received support from over a hundred donors.

One hundred and fifty of our students on the St. Thomas Campus were forced to live in a shelter residence hall that normally accommodates seventy students. They went thirty-six hours without power and running water. The morning after Hurricane Irma left us, I visited the residence hall on our St. Thomas Campus. I saw fear on the faces of some, but what I saw most was a desire to rise above this tragedy. I saw students trying to collect rainwater so they could operate the facilities in the residence hall, since the power and running water on campus had ceased. They were being asked to live under conditions that I am sure most of them had never faced and some could never even imagine. Yet this spirit of rising in the face of trauma and gaining some sense of normalcy were the dominant energies present in every meeting I had with the students. They supported each other and collectively attempted to transform isolation into connectivity, doubt into hope, and fear into laughter and joy. They wanted to know when classes would resume, and some wanted to visit the labs to make sure they completed projects and assignments, despite the dangers they faced.

Through the creativity, resilience and dedication of our faculty, staff and administrators, we were able to resume classes within a month after the first hurricane arrived. This was done in the midst of the stark reality that neither campus had permanent power, island-wide curfews were in existence, and that all night classes had to be cancelled due to the lack of lighting on campus and the curfew. This tragedy created a laboratory for us to demonstrate our "academic resiliency." Faculty members transformed some traditional classes to an online format, while others recorded their lectures and classes so that students who missed class due to current circumstances would still be able to obtain the information. The principle of "hold harmless" guided our perspective to how students should be treated in the midst of this major uncertainty. Students were given the right to withdraw without penalties, and faculty members were asked to be flexible and creative in how they conducted their classes and engaged our students. They would not lower their standards, but raise their patience and increase their passion. Faculty members and staff were being asked to embrace this academic resiliency spirit at a time when many of them had either lost their homes, electricity, transportation and precious belongings.

Approximately 350 of our 2,300 students withdrew during the Fall 2017 semester, but the vast majority remained and completed the semester. The experience was not

perfect, especially with the continuing recovery process having numerous setbacks, but we rose above this horrendous challenge with dignity and pride. We were even asked to save the semester for another Caribbean educational institution — the University of St. Maarten, and we responded to the call.

Recovery from two category five hurricanes is not a straight line forward. It involves circular movements of frustration and disappointments. It is a dance of one step forward and two steps backwards at times. We celebrated the restoration of the Internet due to the dedication and ingenuity of our IT Staff, but then a few days later a cut line at another location took away that which we thought we had permanently obtained. The HBCU spirit of “rising” has no end because there are constant challenges, obstacles and forces formed against these institutions. Yet rising has a spiritual beauty that reminds us that if we remain faithful to our calling, we will always reach another plateau, even if it is just for a temporary moment.

I am very excited about the national debut on PBS of the documentary “Tell Them We Are Rising,” because we want the world to know that HBCUs continue to rise, and that the University of the Virgin Islands is still rising from the most ferocious hurricanes ever recorded in the Atlantic Ocean.

The University hosted a watch party to view this documentary at 6 p.m. on Monday, Feb. 19, in the Administration and Conference Center Building and the Albert A. Sheen Campus on St. Croix. We have invited the entire community and will have a panel discussion via video conference, which was livestreamed on the WTJX’s and UVI’s Facebook pages. Using the #HBCURising, UVI will take part in the national discussion on HBCUs. UVI wants the world to know that the spirit embodied in this powerful and moving documentary is not isolated to struggles against social injustice, but include struggles in the face of natural disasters, financial setback and national doubters.

Dr. Martin Luther King, a graduate of an HBCU, stated that “the ultimate measure of a man (or woman) is not where he (she) stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he (she) stands in times of challenge and controversy.” The measure of the University of the Virgin Islands is great because in the midst of a challenge that could have ended our semester, we rose to the occasion and created educational processes and insights that will be a model for us and other educational institutions in the future.

At my first Town Hall on the St. Thomas Campus after Hurricane Irma had passed, I read the following poem that I wrote in the spirit of Maya Angelou’s classic poem, “Still I Rise.”

“UVI Rises”

Irma, you may blow away our buildings, You may bring tears to our weary eyes,

You may destroy the homes of our families, But still, like air, we will rise

You may frighten off some of our students, You may darken our beautiful skies You may make us doubt each other

But still, like air, we will rise

You may bring us to our knees, Take our roofs off with your lies,

You have even killed some of our people

But still like air, we will rise

Oh Irma, you turned our paradise into a war zone Uprooted majestic trees and made us wonder why You tried to destroy this semester

But still, like air, we will rise

We will rise Irma because we are a resilient people,

We will rise and out of this tragedy create something majestic and transformative We will rise on the wings of the divine, compelled by the will of our people, Watch us Irma, for we will rise, rise and rise

“Tell Them We Are Rising” is UVI’s marching anthem for the future. It is our continuing resolution to never cease from overcoming whatever the world or nature sends our way. This is the precious history and mission of HBCUs. We rose not because of the size of our endowments or the gifts of our philanthropic partners, We rose and continue to rise because of the spirit that resides within these institutions, and the precious individuals who choose to be associated with our special mission.

Submitted on Thursday by: Dr. David Hall, UVI president

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