

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Local Students Debate Politics And Meet Influential Leaders At Junior Statesmen Winter Congress Convention

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A delegation of eight Virgin Islands high school students recently attended the Junior State of America's (JSA) "MidSoHio" (Midwest, Southeast & Ohio River Valley) Winter Congress Convention in Washington, DC, and brought home one of the coveted Best Speaker Gavels, a release issued late Monday.

The group spent five days in the nation's capital, where they debated dozens of student-drafted bills during a mock-legislative session, visited cultural landmarks, and met with influential leaders including Congresswoman Stacey Plaskett, Congressman and Civil

Rights pioneer John Lewis, and Douglas Domenech, assistant secretary for Insular Areas at the Department of the Interior.

Janae Boshculte, Tyler Christensen, Kevin Hughes, Taylor Robinson, Finn Sharpless, and Eesha Ved of Antilles School; Niseini Griffith of Charlotte Amalie High School; and Imani Evans of Good Hope Country Day School, represented the territory at the convention, which was held from February 16-18, according to the release. The V.I. group participated with over 800 students hailing from high schools in Florida, Georgia, Ohio, Tennessee, North Carolina, Indiana, Illinois, and Wisconsin. The delegation received generous contributions from the Ritz-Carlton Hotel, the Marriott Frenchman's Reef Resort, the Virgin Islands, and other private donors,



Congressman John Lewis discusses the

Selma March and the events of Bloody Sunday at the Edmund Petus Bridge with USVI Junior Statesmen Students.

The trip was organized by Marc Stridiron and Attorney Ernest Morris, both JSA alumni and long-time coordinators of Junior Statesmen in the Virgin Islands, along with JSA parents Rafael Llanos, Jr. and Luz Rodriguez. Taylor Robinson, president of the Antilles School JSA Chapter, spearheaded the fundraising efforts and served as student delegation leader. Imani Evans was one of fourteen students to be voted best speaker by her fellow committee members. Ms. Evans attended last year's convention, where she also won a best speaker gavel.

Winter Congress is a student-run legislative simulation, where students work towards passing bills they wrote and submitted prior to the convention. During the two-day event, students present their legislation, propose amendments, and debate their bills. The convention helps students develop their public speaking, advocacy, and leadership skills. Coordinators Stridiron and Morris, believe the students benefit greatly from the exposure to civics and the democratic process. "Winter Congress is a unique and dynamic educational experience," Mr. Morris said. "It provides our students with an opportunity to engage with other students from around the country and to advocate and support legislation that they draft themselves."

Prior to the start of the convention, the students spent two full days exploring the nation's capital and meeting with influential policy makers. On Thursday, February 15th, the students visited the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture, where they met Dr. Eric Williams, the museum's curator for religious exhibits, who led a personal tour of the museum's breathtaking contemplation room. The group then traveled to Capitol Hill for a meeting with Virgin Islands Delegate to Congress Stacey Plaskett. The congresswoman discussed her legislative agenda, tax reform, and disaster recovery funding, among other topics, in a wide-ranging Q&A with the students. Following the meeting with Ms. Plaskett, the students were fortunate enough to meet with civil rights leader, Congressman John Lewis. With their visit to the African American History Museum still fresh in their minds, the students had the extraordinary experience of getting an up close and personal history lesson from the civil rights pioneer, according to the release.

On Friday, February 16th, the students visited the Department of the Interior and met with the leaders of the Office of Insular Affairs, including Assistant Secretary Douglas Domenech, Policy Director Basil Ottley, and Technical Assistance Director Charlene Leizear. Later, the students met with Adam Hodge, a veteran political communications professional. Mr. Hodge, a native of St. Croix, discussed his career in politics and government, which has included positions with the 2008 and 2012 Obama presidential campaigns, spokesman at the Department of the Treasury, communications director at the DNC and his current work in the private sector.

Since 1934, the nonprofit Junior Statesmen Foundation and JSA has educated and prepared high school students to be active and responsible citizens, voters and leaders. JSA-Virgin Islands is presently seeking to establish more school based chapters in the territory's high schools and raise awareness of the program. Students attending the Winter Congress are involved with the Junior Statesmen chapters at their schools. For more than 25 years, Virgin Islands students have participated in the JSA summer schools and summer institutes, which are held at college campuses across the country to include Stanford, Princeton and Georgetown. At these programs, participants learn statesmanship, cultivate leadership skills and broaden their perspective on political issues. JSA Virgin Islands' receives donations for Winter Congress and Summer School. The group is actively seeking donations to assist students who will be attending the upcoming summer programs.

For more information on the Junior Statesmen program, contact Marc Stridiron at (340) 344-2434 or jsavirginislands@gmail.com or Ernest Morris at (340) 690-5373 or ernest.morris@aya.yale.edu.

Feature Image: *L-R: Kevin Hughes, Janae Boschulte, Eesha Ved, Imani Evans, Niseini Griffith, Congressman Lewis, Tyler Christensen, Taylor Robinson, Finn Sharpless*
(Credit: JSA USVI)