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Sterling Optical Owners Award \$19,500 in Scholarships to College-Bound Virgin Islanders Despite Nation's Pandemic-Induced Recession

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Thirteen Class of 2020 high school graduates in both districts received \$1,500 each toward their continuing education from the 19th annual Adams-Mahepath Scholarship on Tuesday. The event was held via a live virtual ceremony at Sterling Optical's offices on both St. Croix and St. Thomas. Despite the pandemic, the Sterling Optical owners upheld tradition even though the celebration was different this year, as all wore masks, social distanced, and refrained from shaking hands and embracing.

"I'm proud to say all of our thirteen recipients have stellar academic records and are involved in many extracurricular activities," said Sterling Optical optometrist and scholarship co-founder Dr. Lisa Adams in praise to the graduates.

Each recipient was selected after careful consideration of their biographical essay, SAT scores, their grade point average (GPA), and community involvement. They all plan to attend a college or university in the fall semester.

Kelsey Bhola, Mahkael Parris, and Angelica Sterling were the students chosen to be highlighted by Dr. Adams, as is the annual custom.

Kelsey, a top-ranking graduate of the Good Hope Country Day School, will be heading off to Harvard University in Massachusetts to pursue her studies in Biomedical Engineering. In preparation for the rigorous course load at the top university in the nation, she said she took all the science and math courses offered at her school. Outside of academia, Kelsey identified as “a regular teen” who enjoys running.

Mahkael was the first black US citizen to [win the Junior World 9-Ball Championship](#) against other 16-year-olds from Iraq, Norway, China, Russia, and many other countries.

“You have to be strategic. You have to think sometimes five steps ahead,” he said as he spoke of the level of strategy and critical thinking needed to play pool, as billiard is commonly called.

For this, former Governor Kenneth Mapp declared November 5, 2018 as ‘Mahkael Parris Day’ in honor of his prowess in the strategic game. The Central High School graduate plans to attend the University of the Virgin Islands' Albert Sheen Campus on St. Croix to study Process Technology and work at Limetree Bay upon completion.

Angelica, valedictorian of the St. Thomas-St. John Seventh Day Adventist School, won the 2017 and 2020 USVI Poetry Out Loud Competition. She will be attending the Washington Adventist University in Maryland to major in Biology/ Pre-Med “to ultimately become a trauma surgeon,” she said.

Eleven out of the thirteen recipients will be pursuing S.T.E.M. (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) related studies, whether it be aerospace engineering, marine biology, or computer science, to name a few. Many expressed wanting to return to the territory to open businesses of their own.

N’Kosi Benjamin, the third highest ranking graduate of his class at the Free Will Baptist School, plans to get his bachelors and masters degree in mechanical engineering. Upon completion of both degrees, “I plan on going to work in WAPA for a while to gain some experience and hopefully open an engineering firm in the Virgin Islands,” N’Kosi said.

Dr. Adam’s final charge to the recipients was, “Remember where you came from. Study hard and accomplish your goals. My goal is to see each of you return to these islands and become productive citizens and someday have your own scholarship program to encourage another young Virgin Islander.” Kevin Williams Jr, in an interview with the Consortium, shared that he aims to do just that upon completion of his jazz studies degree at George Mason University in Virginia.

“I want to come back here to the Virgin Islands and work on the music industry here in terms of jazz. We have a lot of potential, but we don’t utilize it fully,” Kevin said.

He expressed a desire to aid in the creation of the territory’s own jazz festival. Most commonly known for his live steel pan performances as Kev’s Pan Vibes, he shared that he enjoys playing video games in his leisure and spending time with his family, especially at this time when it is safer at home.

Relative to how the pandemic has affected the ceremony, Ms. Adams said, “We normally have a very festive party atmosphere in the offices, but today because of COVID-19 it’s a more laid back presentation.” Nonetheless, “We’re still happy to be able to have this presentation to these young people,” she said.

Joel Mahepath, who serves as Sterling Optical’s local branch chief executive officer and scholarship co-founder alongside his wife, thanked the territory for their 23 years of business and support that helped make these scholarships possible, “including periods where we’ve had economic downturn—in 2008 the recession of the United States, hurricanes hit the islands in 2017, and of course today, we are again faced with another. We are surviving this pandemic, COVID-19,” he said.

For the past 19 years, the Adams-Mahepath scholarship contributed 195 scholarships with a net value of just under \$500,000, all done of their free will. What started off with four recipients in 2002 now expanded to impact thirteen recipients who received a cumulative award of \$19,500 this year. Amidst the recent pandemic that plagues the nation financially and health wise, Adams and Mahepath remain committed to helping students in the Virgin Islands to realize their fullest potential through education, they shared in a written statement.

St. Croix Recipients

Kelsey Bhola, N’Kosi Benjamin, DaRe’one Christopher, Dominique Elizee, Mahkeal Parris, Chai’rick Todman, and Kevin Williams Jr.

St. Thomas-St. John Recipients

Elijah Callwood, Tiffany Connor, Lennycia Finley, Viren Punjabi, Jhamori Sargeant, and Angelica Sterling