

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Island Center For The Performing Arts Reopens With Weekend Of Exceptional Performances

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ST. CROIX -- The Island Center for the Performing Arts came back to life this weekend with riveting performances from the Caribbean Dance School – an event described as the culmination of sweat and muscle from community members with a vision.

Like most local institutions, Island Center's management team had to face a difficult transition between life before Hurricane Maria and life post-Maria. Their natural disaster story is similar to so many others, including a fly-away roof, lost records, broken chairs, busted walls, and ruined flooring.

But the show had to go on.

That was the mindset of people like Monty Thompson, founding artistic director of the Caribbean Dance School, who's been showcasing local talent on the Island Center stage for the bulk of 41 years. This weekend's display, he explained, could only have happened with an attitude of total commitment.



"She's been really, really blessed with so many talents....I think one of the reasons she's been successful so far is because of the arts and because she was able to express herself like that, she learned discipline." - Nadia Bougounea, mother of performer Cereyna Bougouneau (pictured) Photo Credit: Reiki Anduze

"We're showing that we're not gonna fall because of a hurricane. We're gonna get back up here, and we're gonna clean the stage, and we're gonna kill some centipedes; we'll do all of that," he said.

As staff members from the school, parents, students, and other community members partnered with Island Center's president and manager, Eugene Petersen, the grounds were show-ready within 10 weeks.

Even volunteers from La Roche College, Howard University, and the We De Yah Dancers put in some work. According to Mr. Petersen, it was their "muscle" along with a small grant from the Virgin Islands Council of the Arts and individual donations that put the roof back on, repaired chairs, and cleaned the grounds.

"Everything that you see here was done with less than \$12,000 but a lot of muscle," Mr. Petersen said on Saturday night. "That's why I'm so excited about everything. I didn't realize that there was such a big interest in the theater."

And just like that, a center that was founded by philanthropic hands back in 1966 was restored by philanthropic hands 52 years later.



Approximately 400 people showed up to Saturday night's display – the second showing of Caribbean Dance School's annual exhibition. For those who knew it before, the center was very recognizable, except for the outside benches that were barred off with caution tape. There were a few new chairs; however, most of the property has been restored using the original material, Mr. Petersen said.

Why does a dance show matter?

At the core of this unified effort is a message: the arts matter. But in a society that appears to place high value on skills in other areas such as science, technology, and math, one may wonder why.

Well, just ask 18-year-old Le'Ann Fredericks. She's been with the Caribbean Dance School since she was five years old. She said dancing has been her savior.

"Sometimes, I used to come from school and feel stressed, but then I would come to dance practice, and even though it was overwhelming sometimes to get the dances down-pack, it was still always like a way of releasing all my energy from the day" Miss Fredericks told The Consortium Saturday night.

Miss Fredericks took part in a teen and adult performance of Take One – a jazz dance by J. Ross. She described looking out at the crowd on Saturday



Eugene Petersen (Credit: Reiki Anduze)

"You're nervous a little bit at first, but that's normal," she said. "But once you see the crowd, and especially tonight, how lively they are, it just makes you as a dancer, as a performer, want to work even harder."

Perhaps, Chivonne Thomas could also shed light on why the arts matter. She could hardly get her daughter, Aria Jones, to go to sleep after her first dress rehearsal.

"Getting her to bed that night was impossible. She kept talking about the stage and she actually FaceTimed my parents and she was like 'I got to practice on the stage!' She was so excited," Ms. Thomas said. "This night is just a culmination of so many emotions, so

much work.”

Miss Jones and about 16 other little misses from the school’s Kinder class won over the crowd on Saturday night with their performance of “Everything is Sunshine” in green and blue tutus. The upbeat music combined with the synchronized choreography and the cuteness factor that all little children seem to naturally possess had the audience cheering at the top of their lungs.

For Mr. Thompson, *that* type of reaction is what confirms why the arts matter. He believes that art not only has the ability to unite a community, it also has the ability to uniquely touch hearts.

“It’s that energy that makes a community whole and the lack of it makes it un-whole,” he said. “Music, song, dance, poetry, all of that – so what is that? Well, it’s a lot. It’s something intrinsic – what makes somebody happy, what makes somebody sad. And there are people who can bring that out in the form of poetry or a book or dance.”

How to Support Island Center

For those who believe the arts matter, Island Center matters too. Over the years, the center has hosted high school graduations, pageants, talent shows, Broadway shows, musical concerts, dance shows, and much more.

Nadia Bougounea is the mother of performer Cereyna Bougouneau. The older Bougounea said she felt “beyond proud” watching her young adult daughter perform on the Island Center stage. She believes the center is important for many reasons, including its seating capacity.

“Caribbean Community Theater is still open, but the space is just not big enough,” she said. “The community needs the space to be able to give them the outlet to perform and for us as their supporters to be able to come and support them in this venue.”



A performance on Saturday, June 9 during Island Center's reopening event. (Credit: Reiki Anduze)

Although the space has been renovated, it is still in need of more repair. Dancers like Miss Fredericks reported having to dance around an “uneven” stage. The piano is also still in need of repair.

According to Mr. Petersen, small donations from individual community members can go a long way in advancing the restoration process. The money donated will go towards materials and wages for workers.

“It’s not 100 percent. It’s not even 80 percent, but it’s workable and we are going to make it work,” he said. “A little fifty, a little forty, a little thirty dollars really helps.”

The Island Center for the Performing Arts is managed by a board of community members. The board is the head of a nonprofit organization that supports the center. Individuals within the community can become members of the organization if they desire.

Those interested in donating towards the center or becoming a member can call (340) 244-2036 for more information.

Feature Image: A Caribbean Dance School performance on Saturday during Island Center for the Performing Arts' reopening event. (Credit: Reiki Anduze)