

The Virgin Islands Consortium

SCEC Produces Largest Graduating Class In Territory With 213 Students

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ST. CROIX – In between sharing rides to school every day and breaking promises to never procrastinate again, two friends snagged the top titles of the largest graduating class in the territory this year.

Ali Boucenna and Chelsea Valery took extraordinary routes in order to come out on top as valedictorian and salutatorian, respectively, among a senior class of 218 students. During the aftermath of Hurricanes Irma and Maria, Mr. Boucenna and Miss Valery didn't let shortened school days at the St. Croix Educational Complex slow them down. The two could be found spending six hours every Saturday taking advanced placement classes in biology, calculus, and literature.

Hard work paid off, and Mr. Boucenna now finds himself as the recipient of more than \$26,000 a year to study mathematics at Arizona State University. The 17-year-old has a lot to think about the day but hasn't cut himself off from other potential



Ali Boucenna, 17, and Chelsea Valery, 18 pose together

as proud friends and as the valedictorian and salutatorian of the SCEC Class of 2018.

Miss Valery will be receiving more than \$60,000 a year to study neurology at Johns Hopkins University in Maryland. It's a dream come true for the 18-year-old dating back to when she was an 11-year-old girl captivated by "Gifted Hands," the story of world-renowned neurosurgeon Ben Carson.

"Opening the letter was a rush. I did it with my friend," she said. "I couldn't watch it, so he opened it for me, and he was like, 'Chelsea you got in!' and I was like, 'Did I?' and I started to cry."

Both the valedictorian and salutatorian received congratulatory plaques, laptop computers and engraved watches from Cardow Jewelers during their graduation ceremony.

Of the 218 students who started the senior journey with Mr. Boucenna and Miss Valery, 213 received diplomas Thursday at the St. Croix Educational Complex as an overcrowded gymnasium of Barracuda supporters cheered them on. And although 51 students relocated after Hurricane Maria, the SCEC seniors still represent the largest graduating class in the territory.

By the end of the summer, SCEC Principal Genitta Richards hopes that five more students would have graduated, meaning 100 percent of SCEC seniors would have completed their high school year.

Together, graduates with plans to pursue higher education have accumulated more than \$4,123,199 in scholarship monies, according to Ms. Richards. Graduates attending colleges and universities total 140 students. Another 20 students are headed for the military; four will enter the workforce; 39 will pursue technical schools; and 10 are undecided.

During their commencement ceremony, the graduates received numerous nuggets of inspiration from guest speakers and government dignitaries, including Education Commissioner Sharon Ann McCollum, Insular Superintendent Colleen Mae Williams and Governor Kenneth Mapp.



The governor shared a personal testimony of interviewing with an Air Force recruiter who rejected Mr. Mapp's sense of humor and high self-concept when he was 17. The experience caused him to switch directions. There was a lesson in his story that each student could apply, he said.

"The man all but called me the 'N-word'," the governor told the students. "That led me to the New York Police Academy and the New York Police Department. That led me home, and, today, my career led me to be governor of the Virgin Islands. The point of the story is that: Don't let people define who you are."

Tramaine Creighton, a veterinary doctor and 2008 SCEC graduate, encouraged students to step outside their comfort zones and explore different facets of themselves during her keynote address.

"I caution you. Do not limit yourself," she told the graduates. "You can be a very academic person and yet you can be creative and artistic too. You don't have to pick and choose."



In a second keynote address, Jamal Samuel, a self-made entrepreneur, aimed to demonstrate that success can sometimes come through unconventional paths.

After struggling to find his purpose in life, Mr. Samuel eventually found himself working with music artists such as Chris Browne, Rihanna, Kelly Rowland and Nicki Minaj. Mr. Samuel, who is also a 2008 SCEC graduate, is now the founder of Nothing Ordinary where he also acts as a creative director and talent manager. On Thursday, he encouraged the graduates to follow their own purposes, passions, and abilities.