

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Private Sector Saves The Day After Dept. of Education's Failure To Purchase Tickets For Theatre Students To Travel

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ST. CROIX -- AP literature and speech students attending the St. Croix Educational Complex had practiced well over a month for their participation in the Shakespearean Festival being held in St. Thomas today. They had sacrificed other activities, spent their own monies buying material for costumes and other items needed for their participation in the festival. There was only one but critical component missing: the Virgin Islands Department of Education had to purchase tickets for the students to travel, a responsibility that had not been an issue years before, and one that had been requested roughly three months earlier, with a number of followups.

The tickets, then, became an afterthought as the students worked to prepare themselves, trusting that D.O.E. would see the value, as it had in years past, in the students' work, and would no doubt purchase the tickets.

But according to the students, all 11th and 12th-graders, just two days before they were to travel to St. Thomas for the event, notification came down from the Department of Education that the tickets were not purchased and therefore the students could not travel to St. Thomas. Furthermore, even if the students had tried to raise the funds needed in an eleventh hour effort, it would have been futile, they realized, as all flights heading to St. Thomas today were booked.

Frustrated, the students reached out to The Consortium to express their disappointment and what they described as disrespect.

"The excuse was that they weren't sure if they had the funds to allow us to travel because [D.O.E. commissioner Racquel Berry-Benjamin] was not on island," said Korei Hodge, a 12th grade honor student at Complex High. The news was delivered so late that the students were left scrambling.

"I'd just like to mention that my core emotion right now is that I feel disrespected, especially since this was something they were informed of months in advance," Korei added. "And we put in so much time. We gave up our afternoons to practice, of course at nights. Shakespeare is not an easy language to learn and memorize; we had to put in those hours, and then we find out two days before that we can't actually attend."

If it was not for the quick action of Senator Alicia Barnes, who contacted a few private sector firms for help, the 12th grade students would miss their last chance at performing in the festival for their high school, while the 11th grade students would be robbed of their participation in a festival they had heard so much about, and had longed to experience.

Ms. Barnes was reached by the students, who then coordinated her efforts with D.O.E. Acting Commissioner Maria Encarnacion. The senator made contact with G.E.C., Ocean Systems Laboratories, BioImpact and Warren Molser's ferry service. Put together, the private sector firms were able to secure the students' passage to St. Thomas, along with other needs while in the territory's capital.

Yet even with finding help to travel from private sector firms, the students, 13 in total, wanted to share their displeasure with D.O.E.'s failure.

"Just imagine the amount of sacrifices that the students and the teachers made to rehearse and to actually be able to participate in the competition. To find out very late that we [would not] be able to participate, it takes a toll on us," said Mojanía Denis, another 12 grader at Complex High.

A video of the students' expressing their frustration was posted on The Consortium's Facebook platform Thursday. There, residents responded by criticizing D.O.E.

"This is terrible. Common D.O.E., do better," said Taetia Phillips-Dorsett.

Others cheered on the students for making their voices heard. "It's really good to know that there are students who take and make getting an education very seriously, and a priority, participating in educational projects, while some don't care at all," said Ernestine

M. Burke.

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