

The Virgin Islands Consortium

First Survivor Team Introduced At St. Croix's 18th Annual Relay For Life; Local Survivors Share Their Stories

Health / **Published On May 26, 2019 10:02 AM /**

Shenneth Canegata **May 26, 2019**



ST. CROIX -- The Virgin Islands community showed their full support Saturday at the kickoff of the 2019 Relay For Life, St. Croix's 18th annual event hosted at the St. Croix Educational Complex's track and field facility this year. For the first time in the history of the Virgin Islands chapter, the "CanSurvivors in Action" team, comprised of local survivors, was introduced to the public.

Dona Browne-Jones, the chairperson for Relay for Life 2019 and also a cancer survivor, explained that she felt it was important for survivors to give back, because the American

Cancer Society has given so much to them. She expounded that now they are survivors, they can reach out to help other individuals battling the disease. Ms. Browne-Jones shared that her hope is that next year's team will boast even more members. This year the CanSurvivors in Action team raised over \$8,000 for the cause.



CHS Marching Band at Relay for Life 2019 (Shenneth Canegata, VIC)

Ms. Browne-Jones honored those who have been affected by cancer and thanked all of the teams and sponsors for their participation and fundraising efforts. "All the money raised stays here in the territory and is used to help anyone in the local community who reaches out to us for help," she said. Their fundraising goal is \$100,000 and they have raised \$61,932.52 thus far. She issued a challenge to members in the community, explaining that if every single Virgin Islander gave \$20, the \$100,000 goal would be surpassed in no time.

Multiple tents set up by various organizations – public, private, and nonprofit – lined the perimeter of the field. Participants were in high spirits and eager to begin. The event kicked off with a parade led by the "CanSurvivors in Action" group, followed by the Mighty Caribs marching band and the rest of the teams. The marching band's rousing, innovative, high energy performance set the tone for the rest of the evening. Reverend Florence C. Petersen opened with a prayer.



Gov. Albert Bryan and Daughter Sumayah participate in Relay for Life 2019 on St. Croix (Shenneth Canegata, VIC)

Governor Albert Bryan addressed the crowd and thanked everyone for coming out to lend their support. He said he did not intend to speak, but felt it was important to come out and support survivors and the Relay for Life function. He expressed that the event was timely because the territory just got the commitment from FEMA [to rebuild the Juan F. Luis Hospital](#). "The goal is to be able to treat people in the Virgin Islands and hopefully rebuild our hospital here in St. Croix," he said. He conveyed that his administration has been working to get the St. Thomas hospital up to par as well so patients won't have to travel to the states for treatment. "There are a lot of people still in the states, and it is very expensive to go back and forth," he shared. "I just came out with the family to support everybody and have a great afternoon, [it's] a wonderful event, and hopefully we raise tons of money."

The "CanSurvivors in Action" group walked the first lap on their own, and members from the other teams joined in after they had completed one rotation – young and old alike – rotating continually and maintaining a constant presence on the track, signifying the premise that cancer never sleeps. Upbeat music wafting through the air kept the atmosphere light, as some of the team members danced to the beat of the music as they walked.



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GESC Health Insurance Board team poses for a pic (Shenneth Canegata, VIC)

One survivor outlined her experience with cancer, spanning a six-year period – diagnosed in 2005 with reoccurrences in 2007 and 2011 – and treated in Puerto Rico and Florida. Her last treatment lasted a year and she is now in remission. She explained that she had to rely on the kindness of strangers in Florida who opened their home to her and her nine-year-old daughter and housed them for the entire year while she was receiving treatment.

Claire Roker said it best, “Cancer is not your friend. It has no age. It is not prejudiced, and it can hit anybody at any time. It does not discriminate.” She has been participating in Relay for Life since its beginning and explained why it is so important that she helps the cause. “I lost my first daughter to cancer at the age 41 and now her daughter, my granddaughter, is a breast cancer survivor,” she said.

Senator Novelle Francis, who has participated in the event since its inception, shared his story. He said that one of the biggest reasons he gives his support is because he is a cancer survivor. He makes it his business to do his part to give back because the American Cancer Society was very instrumental during his recovery period. His father also succumbed to his battle with cancer, so over the years he has always made a contribution in his memory. “Cancer has really dominated the Virgin Islands, particularly in St. Croix,” he said.



First Lady Yolanda Bryan, center right, and Gov't House staff pose for a pic (Shenneth Canegata, VIC)

Viya's vice president of public relations and governmental affairs, Jennifer Matarangas-King, said that Relay for Life is very dear to the company because it has many employees, retirees, and family members who are survivors. She said that it was not just about Viya writing a check but about participating and showing love for the community and the company's support for the survivors that are around them.

Team members of the Government Health Insurance Board showed out in large numbers, which included members from the St. Thomas staff. Beverly Joseph, the chairperson, who is also a survivor, explained, "We have sponsors that wanted to participate, but this year I think it is only fitting that the Government Health Insurance Board participate to show solidarity for the members on the plan that are fighting, those that have lost the fight, and to encourage our members to take their annual preventive services, to get fit and to just show support in alliance with this great cause."



Sen. Novelle Francis, a cancer survivor, shared his story and expressed why he has continued to support Relay for Life (Shenneth Canegata, VIC)

Traditionally, towards the end of the evening, there is a luminary ceremony where everyone affected by cancer is represented with a luminaria. Petra Victor, seated at the luminary tent, explained that the primary responsibility of the luminary committee is to sell or obtain donations for candles in memory of, or in honor of someone who has had cancer or has lost their battle with cancer. The cost is \$5 per candle, per person represented.

According to the [American Cancer Society's website](#), "Each light represents a life—a life taken by cancer, a survivor of cancer, or a support for a person still fighting the disease. It's a powerful demonstration that gives people the opportunity to grieve but also offers comfort and hope." For the ceremony, as survivors share their story, the main lights are turned off and candles lit around the track, and also on the bleachers depicting the word "Hope". Ms. Victor explained that while it is a solemn ceremony, it is beautiful and very moving.

The event continues today. It is not too late to give to the cause. You can do so by visiting the [Relay for Life](#) website or at the event today.