

The Virgin Islands Consortium

20-Year-Old St. Croix Native Earns Pilot License, Visits 'Good Morning America' And Gets Free Ticket To See Chance the Rapper After Completing Pilot Training Program In Chicago

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A St. Croix native had one of his best summers yet this year after getting accepted into Tuskegee NEXT, affording the youngster the ability to visit the Good Morning America show, get a tour of United Airlines' operations at the O'Hare International Airport in Chicago, and being provided with a free ticket to see Chance the Rapper in concert.

All this while earning his private pilot license from the Federal Aviation Administration.

Marc-Anthony Colon told the Consortium Thursday evening that his experience during the 8-week Tuskegee Next private pilot training program was "unreal," and the feeling after being accepted was indescribable.

Tuskegee NEXT seeks to transform the lives of at-risk youth through aviation education and career path opportunities, so they can transform their communities, reads a blurb on the program's website. Based in Chicago, the program's strategy is to provide role models and a clear path toward aviation careers through flight training, life skills, and educational assistance.

Mr. Colon, a UVI student from St. Croix, was among applicants vying to be chosen for the summer-long intense training opportunity. He said the application process included an essay and multiple interviews. Roughly 25 students were selected, who then had to go through what is called ground training, where even more students are cut from the final group. This year, 14 applicants -- including the St. Croix native -- were ultimately chosen.



Marc-Anthony Colon

"The feeling was crazy. I was so excited; I just couldn't believe it. But the hard work paid off and I got accepted," said Mr. Colon after learning that he was accepted among the 14 students from across the U.S. The program is for youth ages 16-20. At 20, Mr. Colon was the oldest in this year's class.

Even before being chosen for Tuskegee NEXT, Mr. Colon was already well versed in the aviation field: he took his first solo flight about 5 years ago. "I applied to this program because I saw it as an opportunity to continue my flight training. My end goal is to be an

airline pilot," he said.

The program pays for everything -- room and board, other needs -- except for the ticket to travel to Chicago.



Tuskegee NEXT 2019 students

During the third week of the program, Mr. Colon embarked on his solo trip, flying to an airport 50 nautical miles from where he took off. "I flew from one airport to the next, then to a next airport and back to my home airport," he said. Mr. Colon then had his "check ride" with the FAA to receive his private pilot certificate/license.

Three days ahead of graduation, Mr. Colon and the 14 other students were given an experience of a lifetime by Tuskegee Next. They were flown to Newark, New Jersey for the Good Morning America show, which Mr. Colon described as unbelievable.

"We were told that we were going to be on Good Morning America, (but) I didn't know what to expect because I had never been on big national television before," he said.



Marc-Anthony Colon

During the GMA show, a paratrooper descended from the sky with tickets in hand for the Tuskegee students to attend a concert to see Chance the Rapper perform.

Additionally, United Airlines, which sponsored the travel tickets from Chicago to Newark, gave the students a behind-the-scenes tour of its operations at O'Hare International Airport in Chicago.

"I have two more days. Saturday is graduation and then Sunday I'll be back home," Mr. Colon said.

