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'Not Only Do We Lose Lives, We Lose So Much Potential': Virgin Islanders March Against Violence in St. Thomas

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Virgin Islanders stood together on Sunday, Oct. 11 2020 during the Aaron Nicolas Hamilton Ashby Foundation's march against violence in St. Thomas. By. VIRGIN ISLANDS DRONE SERVICES

ST. THOMAS — The Aaron Nicolas Hamilton Ashby Foundation on Sunday hosted the first "Reclaiming Our Village" event, where numerous adults and young activists marched from Crown Bay Center and TuTu Park Mall and converged at the Emancipation Garden. There, they called for peace and spread a message of love in response to the incessant gun violence plaguing the U.S. Virgin Islands.

On July 9, Aaron Ashby, a vibrant 14-year-old [lost his life tragically](#) due to gun violence. Since then, his mother, Andrea Hamilton, has aspired to turn the violence-laden territory into a paradise where every child can thrive.

The march embraced the theme of the village taking responsibility for its children. Through this first event, the foundation sought to create the beginning of an adult/child partnership, where every adult will be challenged to commit to serving the children of the community.

"We wanted to bring the community together. A lot of times we are marching, but it's not us together," said May Leader, one of the organizers of the event, pointing to strength in unity. "Just like in the past they had that mentality about the village, that's what we wanted to bring back. Its not just one person looking out for the other; it's about all of us in the community."

Ms. Leader like many of those who were marching, has personally been impacted by gun violence. In 2009, her nephew Kahlif Leader, was murdered at age 16 in Kirwan Terrace while walking from playing basketball. "A lot of times not until it hits home we really understand the value," Ms. Leader said. "He was like the son I never had; every Saturday we would spend it together. That's a subject I don't like to talk about because I still get emotional about it."

After the march, many individuals and dignitaries talked about how gun violence has ravaged the territory. Senator Janelle Sarauw said, "It is time to reclaim our community. The government has a responsibility but government can't go to PTAs; government don't read to children. Parents have a duty, parents must parent, and teachers must teach. We have to reclaim what is ours. It is time for us to have a revolution of values. While we scream that black lives matter, they do, but black lives must matter to black people."

Senator Myron Jackson, who is no stranger to gun violence advocacy in the Virgin Islands, had powerful words for those in attendance. "When a community gets together, that's a positive thing. It takes a village to raise a child, and that's the concept here, that it's all on us."

Mr. Jackson added, "We cannot on a daily basis have our community riddled with gun violence and the loss of our children and it's business as usual the next day. That doesn't make any sense." Mr. Jackson said the territory is too small of a community not to tackle gun violence, which he said is the real pandemic. "A 14-year-old shouldn't be shot down in the street of the Virgin Islands and we stay silent," he said.

Along with elected officials, law enforcement, behavioral health professionals, clergy, and educators were all in attendance at the march. Racquel Berry-Benjamin, commissioner of the V.I. Department of Education, had some encouraging words for the community. "I am here because I chose to be here. This is our village and we all have to commit to doing our part," she said.

Dr. David Hall, president of the University of the Virgin Islands, said, "The reason this is one of the most critical issues facing us, is not only do we lose young lives, but we lose so much potential. We do not know what these individuals would have been able to contribute to this territory, to this world, if they would have been able to live and realize all of their potential."

The "Reclaiming Our Village" march comes two days after St. Croix experienced an [exceptionally violent Friday night](#), leaving four individuals injured from gunshots and a 21-year-old woman who was caught in the crossfire, dead. The following day, three individuals were shot in St. Thomas.

Friday's homicide was the 41st territory-wide for 2020. The 39th homicide [occurred in St. Thomas at Oswald Harris Court](#) on September 13, followed by the 40th incident less than an hour later on

the Melvin Evans Highway on St. Croix, where a 20-year-old woman [was pursued by high-speed](#) chase and was shot and killed.

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