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International Educator Cristina Marie Senosa is STT-STJ District Teacher of the Year; Winner on St. Croix is Alicia Walters-Ramos

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From left, STT-STJ District teacher of the year, Cristina Marie L. Senosa, and Alicia Walters-Ramos, STX District teacher of the year. By. THE V.I. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

The Virgin Islands Department of Education said late Thursday it has named Alicia Walters-Ramos in the St. Croix District, and Cristina Marie L. Senosa in the St. Thomas-St. John District the 2020-2021 District Teachers of the Year.

Senosa's win marks a first in the department's history that an international teacher has won the prestigious teaching award, according to D.O.E.

The educators' accomplishments were announced during online ceremonies streamed live on the department's Facebook page on November 6 and 12, D.O.E. said. They, and four other top-teacher candidates in their respective districts were recognized for their professionalism, love of students and teaching, and involvements outside the classroom that enrich the lives of others.

According to the release, during emotional remarks following her historic win, Senosa, a native of the Philippines who came to the territory three years ago and teaches Social Studies at Ivanna Eudora Kean High School, thanked her family, students and colleagues.

"All teachers, students and parents of the Virgin Islands, this is for you," she began, to the applause of attendees. "I came here a few years ago as a newbie and I am thankful for the learnings I have gotten from the new teacher trainings. Because of this, I have been the best version of myself today."

Senosa also praised her colleagues tapped for the award this year, saying, "I have gained, not competitors, but sisters."

Walters-Ramos, who teaches English at the St. Croix Educational Complex High School, said, "Without guidance from above, we would not be here today celebrating five outstanding teachers. This journey as a teacher has presented its challenges; however, as a teacher, we always find a way to maximize the skills our students need in order to become successful members of society."

Despite the setbacks caused by the coronavirus pandemic, Walters-Ramos celebrated the opportunities teachers and students have been given to embrace technology, according to D.O.E.

"You (COVID-19) forced us into isolation and forced us to adapt to this new, virtual world, but we will come out VI Strong with the use of the technology we longed for right at our fingertips," she said. "Now, we can truly embrace our mission statement of providing educational experiences that are student-centered, technologically competitive, and academically rigorous and relevant, so that [students] can become successful members of the local and global communities."

Deputy Superintendent Carla Bastian, who presided over the St. Croix event, pointed out that judging criteria involved teacher evaluations, length of time teaching, attendance, and skill, among other criteria, D.O.E. said. Candidates also underwent a lesson observation and a one-on-one interview with an independent judging panel. The teacher with the highest number of points won.

The ceremonies were attended by Governor Albert Bryan, Congresswoman Stacey L. Plaskett, Senate President Novelle E. Francis, Board of Education Chairman Arah Lockhart, school administrators, and a host of other education and elected officials, according to the release.

"There are three things in common that usually lead to successful people," Mr. Bryan said. "One, some sort of strong spiritual belief, a very strong sense of value for education in their family, and somewhere along the way, someone pulled them aside and told them they were special—and nine times out of ten, that someone who pulled them aside was an educator."

He added, "Today, I want to say thank you to each and every one of you teachers for the great job you do with our children, especially during this time of COVID. Even though we are challenged, I salute you and your perseverance. If education wins, we all win."

D.O.E. Commissioner Racquel Berry-Benjamin showered praise and gifts on the award candidates, thanking them for caring about their students and for the work they do every day, according to the release. She presented the two winners' access to virtual comedy and magic

shows, and an online subscription to download music from their favorite artists. Winners and candidates in both districts received other tokens of appreciation from their school administrators and colleagues.

Symra Dee Brown, deputy superintendent in the St. Thomas-St. John District who served as mistress of ceremonies for her district's event, dubbed "Teaching in Paradise", said, "Today, we celebrate you and your extraordinary greatness as you stand individually shaping the lives of our students. We appreciate where we are in the world because we live in paradise. We know, that despite all of our challenges because we are in paradise, we are pressing on."

The other 2020-2021 District Teacher candidates in the St. Croix District included Wendy Wynter, Lew Muckle Elementary School; Tysha St. Jules, Juanita Gardine K-8 School; Veronica Sargeant, Pearl B. Larsen PreK-8 School and Ann-Louise Wilkins, John H. Woodson Jr. High School.

The other candidates in the St. Thomas-St. John District included Donnia Attidore-Meyers, Bertha C. Boschulte Middle School; Sherilyn O. Hodge, Joseph Sibilly Elementary School; Melony Dawes, Charlotte Amalie High School and Roselyn Samuel-Hodge, Joseph Gomez Elementary School.

In December, Walters-Ramos and Senosa will compete for the State Teacher of the Year award.