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Territorial Youth Art Month Exhibits Feature Visual Art, Drama Against Gun Violence, and Local Superhero Comic on Opening Days

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Artist Atiyah Potter and model Lesha Matthew-Belgade. By. MARIA AURORA STILES

This month, the territory celebrates thirteen years of publicly featuring an array of creativity from young people during Youth Art Month (YAM)— a national observance of which the U.S. Virgin Islands is a participating region— by means of an art exhibit.

Beginning on Saturday, local youth art will be displayed on St. Thomas at the Virgin Islands Children’s Museum. The art will be displayed through April 17 and on St. Croix at Cruzan Heritage and Nature Tourism (CHANT) starting on Saturday, March 27 through April 24. The opening reception of the exhibit were set to take place from 5:00 pm-8:00 pm on both islands.

Art appreciators should expect artwork from over 30 public schools, private schools, homeschools, universities, and other groups territory wide. The exhibits will also feature artwork from the Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Council's (VIDVSAC) art competition, performances by the St. Croix Educational Complex's Drama Club, and a local superhero comic book.

During the month of March, art teachers nationwide promote the arts within their schools with special programming like art competitions, side-walk chalk drawing, art festivals, and workshops, as YAM assistant (formerly co-chair) Niarus Walker shared in the St. Croix This Week last year. Since the pandemic moved most events to a virtual platform, co-chair of YAM Maria "Irieah" Stiles launched the first [VI Student Gallery Online](#) exhibit on Facebook in March 2020 to abide by public health precautions while still featuring and encouraging youth art all year round. In reference to this shift, Ms. Stiles said in a release, "The arts teach us to creatively solve every step of the way and to transmute what feels like chaos into something innovative, beautiful, and awesome."

The deadline for VIDVSAC's teen dating violence art submissions is March 22, 2021 at midnight, and decisions will be announced on March 24, 2021. Winners will be displayed at C.H.A.N.T. on March 27.

In the age of technology and Covid where most communication is virtual, teens attested to experiencing psychological and digital violence and not so much the physical, VIDVSAC's outreach coordinator Darlene Springer expressed.

The Drama Club under the direction of Sayeeda Carter, teacher of English and Drama at the Complex and founder of Act Out Ensemble: Theatre of the Oppressed Virgin Islands shared that her students expressed a desire to take a stand against gun violence through performance and spoken word.

When instructing her students, Ms. Carter ties in their community in group discussions and readings by asking them thought provoking questions about community issues while introducing them to literature, such as William Shakespeare's plays.

In reference to Romeo and Juliet, the bard's most renowned play, she inquired of her students, "Is love more powerful than hate?" and "Would you want revenge if one of your family members was killed?" The responses she relayed from the territory's young people were impressive. One student responded to the first by saying, "Love because it inspires."

"Not enough people are talking to them and are willing to listen," Ms. Carter said, so she asks them the questions many shy away from.

"I really want children to know it's not impossible to fulfill your dreams. You just have to put the work in. You put the work in, and God will help you do the rest," expressed comic book author Karim Callwood as a message of hope for young readers considering that gun violence continues to plague the community.

Mr. Callwood created stories of the territory's superhero seven years ago. His comic book tells the story of a local superhero with Superman-like abilities who tries to help the Virgin Islands by warding off enemies who commit crimes that often get covered up. The stories are related to what is typically experienced in the territory, he said.

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