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Young Men Go From Students to Solar Installers and Two Nonprofits Benefit Through St. Croix Foundation Initiative

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From left: Essence Carter, STX Foundation executive assistant, Titus Promise, solar installer, Junia John-Straker, Lutheran Services V.I. CEO, and Deanna James, STX Foundation president. By. ST. CROIX FOUNDATION

The Flamboyant Gardens on St. Croix, which provides individual living for low-income seniors was supported with a gift that will keep on giving for years to come. So too, was the Boys & Girls Club facility in Frederiksted. Both operations saw a portion of their facilities installed with solar panels sponsored by the St. Croix Foundation, with leaders of the nonprofit last week hosting a presentation event at Flamboyant Gardens that spoke to the advantages of the solar panels for residents.

The benefits of the program, named the Solar-Supported Community Center Project and Workforce Development Initiative, are manifold: not only did the Boys & Girls Club and Flamboyant Gardens receive solar panels that have resulted in considerable savings since installation took place in 2020, but the team of solar workers who installed the panels included nine from a cohort of ten who participated in the St. Croix Foundation's 6-month solar installation program for students ages 18-28, through the National Center for Construction Education and Research (NCCER), with intense classroom instruction in NCCER core curriculum, electrical levels 1-4, and solar PV installation.

During the April 14 presentation, St. Croix Foundation President Deanna James spoke of the nonprofit's holistic thinking relative to community development. This is not a strategy that is new to the Foundation. Following the closure of the HOVENSA refinery in 2012, the St. Croix economy — once bustling with commerce activity — was dealt a near fatal blow that resulted in the closure of many businesses, closure or consolidation of private schools and a great migration of the island's middle class to the U.S. mainland. This also impacted nonprofits at a time when the community needed them the most.

The St. Croix Foundation, approximately one year before the 2017 storms, brought together a group of 50 St. Croix nonprofits to formulate a plan. "We talked about how do we think through collective impact. How do we work together to leverage the scarce resources we have to do bigger things," said Ms. James.

The Foundation had also placed its utility cables underground some ten years before the Christiansted undergrounding effort. This paid off in a big way in 2017 following Hurricanes Irma and Maria. "We had internet and electricity within four to five days after Hurricane Maria," Ms. James said. Word got out quickly, and within the next five to six days after talk of the Foundation's resiliency circulated, "we had about 20 to 30 people working out of our office."

"The reason I tell this story is because that opportunity for two months to work in such close proximity to your partners was profound because everything in terms of our response to Maria was informed" by that experience," Ms. James said. And so the innovative ideas of holistic development and multi-prong thinking led to this approach that provides sustainability for the St. Croix community.

Not only did nine young men learn a new trade, they all were employed, adding to the pool of contributing residents. Their work included onsite training to install the solar panels at the Flamboyant Gardens and Boys & Girls Club, which benefited the organizations but also the young men.

Titus Promise, part of the first cohort of solar installers, spoke of his experience from the classroom to the field. He said the process was not easy but perseverance resulted in graduation in December 2019 for nine members of the class. By February, Mr. Promise had landed a job.

"It's been alright. You get to learn new stuff, try to get better, move up the ladder. That's what I've been doing," Mr. Promise said. He started as a helper but now is roof lead with his own team. Mr. Promise is 20 years old.

The total cost of the program was roughly \$249,000, said the Foundation. The Boys & Girls Club has seen savings of over \$2,500, while the Flamboyant Gardens — whose solar installation was completed in November — has seen savings of more than \$500, said St. Croix Foundation Executive Assistant Essence Carter.

The solar system includes a 6.4 kilowatt PV system with 20 panels distributed across three buildings. There are three 48-volt batteries, and a sky box inverter which is where the solar energy is translated into the electricity used to power a portion of the facility's community center.

“We are grateful for the collaboration of St. Croix Foundation in the solarization of the Flamboyant Gardens senior community center,” stated Junia John-Straker, chief executive officer for Lutheran Social Services of the Virgin Islands. “It is an opportunity for LSSVI to reinforce our social service support to the community and make Flamboyant Gardens a resilient hub during disasters.

She added, "Having solar means we can provide reliable power for low-income seniors during power outages — helping them keep communication lines open, store their medication safely and maintain access to information available to them."

Partners in the successful execution of this program included the Department of Labor and the department's Workforce Development Board, Sustainable System and Design International, Lions Den, and course instructors Ian Caesar, Kevin Dubois, Jensen Berkitt, Gregory Christian, and Sana Joseph.