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'They Can Mask Our Faces But Not Our Intelligence': Central High Graduates Make the Best of Drive-Thru Ceremony

Education / **Published On May 18, 2021 07:45 PM /**

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Anasha Gomez, an honor roll student, rides with her mother to receive her high school diploma on Tues. May 18, 2021 at the St. Croix Central High School. By. ERNICE GILBERT FOR VICONSORTIUM

The St. Croix Central High School students came in cars, trucks, SUVs and other vehicles, dressed in cap and gown, some with honor sashes for their high academic performance in the twelfth grade. The vehicles lined up in groups and utilized the west entrance to circle to the front. At the front, government officials, among them Governor Albert Bryan and Dept. of Education Commissioner Racquel Berry-Benjamin stood as the students — who had exited their vehicles to receive their diploma — made their way to the podium. The students were then congratulated and

elbowed, a gesture used in lieu of handshakes thanks to Covid-19. Parents and other family members took pictures and some made loud noises in support of the graduates. Moments later, the students were back in their vehicles and off school premises.

So was the CHS graduation ceremony Tuesday morning. The Bryan administration and its Dept. of Education is foregoing in-person ceremonies this year for hybrid, walk-thru and drive-thru events that include some virtual aspects — a decision they contend was the best path forward.

The ceremony's style, which students had protested against, had some glitches, including long gaps that affected the livestream portion of the production. Some parents complained about the choice of music, too, with the disk jockey playing everything from Dancehall to Soca that many deemed inappropriate for the occasion.

For the students, however, it was all about playing the best hand from the cards they were dealt. At the school's west wing, which is best accessed through the west entrance, a parked truck was decorated with the school's signature red and white colors, a signing board and a deejay, who played music as the vehicles passed the area. Students stepped out of their vehicles to sign the board quickly before moving on. A screen showing the action at the front was erected for students who were waiting their turn.



They all had smiles, overjoyed, it seemed, to have crossed the important finish line of high school.

C.H.S. graduated 169 students this year, with the school highlighting the top 25 scholars. Ancelma Elliot, CHS counselor, gave a powerful speech to open the ceremony.

"Class of 2021 we have made it," she proclaimed. "The resiliency that you showed as you navigated through a year of countless uncertainties is truly admirable. You have conquered this new normal and are now ready to conquer this world. Go out there and continue to make us proud. And remember, they can mask our faces but never our intelligence."

Most remarks were not delivered at the drive-thru event. Instead, they were prerecorded and shown online on D.O.E.'s Facebook page.

School Principal Yves Abraham encouraged the graduates to maneuver through adversity, which he advised must be encountered throughout life. "I know this is not what you envisioned several years ago, but life's rollercoaster has a funny way of turning our lives upside down and putting obstacles in our way," he said. "Therefore, you need to develop strategies to overcome those obstacles."

Mr. Bryan revisited the students' disrupted last three years — from hurricanes Irma and Maria to Covid-19 — which he acknowledged robbed the students of normal high school years. Yet those years forced the graduates to work even harder and become more creative, Mr. Bryan said. "I commend each and everyone of you for your work and dedication, and I encourage you to continue with the same valiant and vivacious spirit as you move forward accomplishing your goals in life," he said.

To the CHS graduates, Ms. Berry-Benjamin said, "While the school year did not end with the graduation ceremony we all wanted for you given the health risks involved, I want to remind you that having a particular ceremony does not define your success now or in your future."



The mother of Tintawee Christian — [killed while walking home](#) and is said to be an innocent victim of the shooting that took his life — walks across the stage for her son. Tintawee was excited about graduation and would have received his high school diploma along with the other CHS graduates. (Ernice Gilbert, VI Consortium)

CHS seniors along with those of the St. Croix Educational Complex earlier this month protested the drive-thru graduation plans. Charlotte Amalie High School seniors did the same on Thursday, and on Monday submitted a written, notarized complaint to the Board of Education, which led to an emergency hearing Monday afternoon. That hearing led to the subpoenaing of Dept. of Education officials and the St. Thomas senior students for a hearing scheduled for Tuesday that was ongoing at time of writing (6:47 p.m.).

The students' efforts and the board's decision to take up the matter may wind up being ineffective as Governor Bryan on Monday told the Consortium that the territory remains under a state of emergency, which gives Mr. Bryan vast powers to take unilateral action.

Even without the state of emergency, the same law that empowers students to go before the board to seek a resolution, states that though the board's decision on a matter may be final, it can be overridden by the territory's governor.

On Monday, Mr. Bryan appeared to be immovable in his stance that in-person, seated events were off limits. "The Board of Education has no say in what the health protocols of the Virgin Islands are. And I think people forget, we're under a state of emergency still, so the Board of Education ruling is a matter of course but it has no effect on what's going to happen. We've already made our decision and that's how the graduations will be carried out," Mr. Bryan said.

Earlier, Mr. Bryan responded to a Consortium question pointing to in-person, seated graduations ongoing in states across the U.S. "From the beginning of this pandemic I knew that we had to take care of ourselves; we had to make the decisions here. So every other place else in the United States can do what they want to do, we're going to continue to do the things that allow us to receive and make the progress that we've done over the last year and continue that."

The students' chief complaint is what they say is D.O.E.'s failure to host in-person, seated graduation events, which they contend would be the culmination of a tragic high school experience: in ninth grade, Hurricanes Irma and Maria disrupted their education resulting in the closure of some buildings and the start of double school sessions — which displaced many students. In grades eleven and twelve, Covid-19 disrupted learning, leading to virtual classes that are in place for public schools in the USVI at present.