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Resiliency: 141 Ivanna Eudora Kean High School Graduates Thankful to Cross Important Finish Line, Ready to Take on the Next

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Graduates pose for a picture with their diploma following the 2021 Ivanna Eudora Kean High School graduation event on Thursday, May 20, 2021. By. KYLE MURPHY FOR VI CONSORTIUM

ST. THOMAS — Approximately 141 graduates of the Ivanna Eudora Kean High School Class of 2021 participated in the Dept. of Education's walk-thru graduation ceremony on the school's campus on Thursday afternoon, overjoyed to have bested an important, yearslong challenge and — with headwinds during their senior years unlike any before them — ready to take on the next.

D.O.E.'s hybrid plan for the school was disrupted by internet connectivity issues, upending what was supposed to be a seamless transition from prerecorded speeches and performances that was scheduled to air on the department's Facebook page, followed instantly by the walk-thru event on a stage near the school's gymnasium. Because of the connectivity problems, the walk-thru event started an hour late, but once it got underway, it took just over an hour from start to finish. The prerecorded portion aired later.

As the students crossed the stage, family members and other classmates blew horns, waved signs and cheered them on. Graduates walked down from an upper walkway and met two family members before walking toward the gymnasium where they received their high school diploma. Before exiting the stage, they were elbowed by Governor Albert Bryan, Commissioner of Education Racquel Berry Benjamin, Superintendent of the St. Thomas-St. John District Stefan Jurgen, and Acting Principal at I.E.K.H.S. Alicia Leerdam.

Students took pictures with their friends and family at the gymnasium's entrance or at the bottom of the staircase before they left school grounds. Additional family members and guests were underneath an awning covering adjacent to the walkway that students walked with two family members on the way to receive their diploma.



Ivanna Eudora Kean graduates in line with family members during the school's walk-thru graduation event on Thursday, May 20, 2021. (Kyle Murphy for VI Consortium)

Eurnett Christopher, class salutatorian delivered remarks that encompassed the struggles and resilience of the 2021 class. "They say that high school will be the best four years of your life and that it is as good as you make it. I can definitely say that our class made the most of it," she said.

Ms. Christopher detailed the obstacles that were specific to the class of 2021, including the struggle of recovering from two category five hurricanes their freshman year, and a global pandemic that started in March 2020 — the class's junior year — and was still ongoing at the time of their graduation. She said if she had just one word to describe the I.E.K.H.S. Class of 2021, it would be "resilient."

Toward the end of her remarks, she spoke to the [recent protest action](#) in St. Thomas led by the Charlotte Amalie High School and I.E.K.H.S., as the students fought for a graduation ceremony they said would have been fitting for a class that had faced compounded disruption in their years of learning. The unprecedented action included not only a protest, but also [a five-hour long hearing](#) called by the V.I. Board of Education that resulted in the board [ordering D.O.E.](#) — who had planned its walk-thru event with a prerecorded video of speeches — to come up with an in-person solution. During a Wednesday evening meeting between the student leadership and the Dept. of Education, ideas were pitched by the students, but those ideas were deemed too late for implementation with just hours before the graduation.

"We were the modern-day Queen Mary," declared Ms. Christopher during her powerful speech. "The decisions of the Department of Education devastated teachers, parents, and students who waited twelve years to see the day we walked across the stage. Nevertheless, we pushed for the graduation we deserve. We deserve an outstanding graduation because we, the Ivanna Eudora Kean students did not have a traditional experience. Despite it all we were resilient."



Angelina Thomas, class valedictorian, said during her speech, “Our class motto states we can’t lose, we’ve already won. Although we have lost countless opportunities from the start of our freshman year, we’ve learned to never take favorable moments for granted as we cherished the time we had together no matter the circumstance.” She cited the Covid-19 pandemic and the 2017 hurricanes as the obstacles that forced the class to adapt.

The governor, Education commissioner, Delegate to Congress Stacey Plaskett and Senate President Donna Frett-Gregory all provided pre-recorded congratulatory remarks published on D.O.E. 's Facebook page.

The Consortium spoke with students and family members as they left the event to gauge how they felt it went. The vast majority said it went well given the circumstances. Malachi Pantiere, president of the senior class at I.E.K.H.S. who represented his class during the Board of Education hearing, said while the board ruled in favor of the students, they participated in D.O.E.'s plan because of their principal, who had worked to put on the best event she could given the Dept. of Education's parameters that banned in-person, seated affairs. He also said it was too late to make any real changes, though the senior students pitched ideas to D.O.E. during the Wednesday evening hearing.

The event marked the third of four public high school ceremonies, with the fourth and final ceremony scheduled for Friday at 1:00 p.m., when Charlotte Amalie High School students will participate in a walk-thru affair.