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RTPark Launches Two New Workforce Development Initiatives With Aim of Attracting USVI STEM Talent Both Home and Abroad to Opportunities in Tech

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RTPark headquarters at the University of the Virgin Islands' St. Croix campus. By. RTPARK

The UVI RTPark said Wednesday that it launched two new exciting initiatives in June after hearing the community's need to build capacity for economic diversification, particularly in underrepresented sectors like technology.

The RTPark launched the Virgin Islands STEM Talent Archive (VISTA+) and the Pre-Accelerator programs under its workforce development and entrepreneurship initiatives in an effort to support to the territory's goal to develop a more resilient economy — in line with the initiatives in the territory's Vision 2040 strategy and action plan, according to the release.

The RTPark said VISTA+ is a signature talent attraction and retention program that supports the workforce development initiatives of the RTPark. An online database that connects tech talent within the Virgin Islands diaspora with opportunities to work in the territory, the program's goal is to build capacity for the growing tech hub in the U.S. Virgin Islands (USVI). VISTA+ hosts a platform that allows USVI companies looking for tech or STEM talent to post current job vacancies and connect with Virgin Islanders around the world who seek local jobs in the same fields, according to the release.

Officially launched on June 23, the platform is live with full-time job openings and new candidates registering every day, the RTPark said. The program aims to build a network within the park's tech ecosystem.

“This network is not only about connecting Virgin Islanders with jobs, but creating a data archive and map of our USVI STEM professionals working globally, said Sydney Paul, the RTPark's manager of business intelligence and marketing. Ms. Paul is also co-lead of the VISTA+ program along with RTPark's Chief-of Staff, Aminah Saleem.

“We'll be able to see how many Virgin Islands are engineers working in Europe, or software developers in the Midwest--how many work in blockchain development or agriculture tech research. This is data that the whole community can use to drive education and economic development policy, apply for grants, perform business attraction efforts and more,” Ms. Paul said.

The RTPark is encouraging all Virgin Islanders who work in STEM fields to register and help build the online community, even if they are not seeking a job. Companies across the territory are encouraged to register and post jobs that can bring Virgin Islands talent back home.

The VISTA+ platform was built by an Accelerate VI graduate, Leon Hughes, founder of Shore IQ. Other VISTA+ team members who work closely with Leon to ensure its success include the RTPark's administrative assistant and UVI grad, Kedisha Charles, as well as UVI intern Rex Cazaubon. The RTPark is proud to say the program was made by Virgin Islanders, for Virgin Islanders, according to the release.

The Accelerate VI Pre-Accelerator program was created to be a mentorship-driven training ground for early-stage startup founders looking to build prototypes and prepare their business while readying themselves for a full-time accelerator, the park said. The Pre-Accelerator Program focuses more on mentorship, validating the idea, and setting up the structure of the business at the earliest stage. Compared to our full-time accelerator, Accelerate VI, which focuses more on growth and scale as the companies are further along in their journey.

Eric Sonnier, the RTPark's director of business attraction and entrepreneurship, said that the program's team is proud to work with such talented, young Virgin Islanders who are solving problems for the place that they grew up--in the place that they grew up.

"Tech-based entrepreneurship is about finding a pain-point and building solutions to address it. The people best positioned to build solutions for the Virgin Islands are people who live with those pain-points," he said. "We're seeing that firsthand with the Accelerate VI's Pre-Accelerator Program. These young Virgin Islanders are building solutions to address the lack of food delivery, behavioral health, and innovative ways for tourists to experience the USVI."

The inaugural Accelerate VI Pre-Accelerator Cohort shared the progress made and milestones reached over the past three months during the live showcase event on June 21. The founders of Boomerang Eats VI (mobile food ordering and delivery service), VI Crawl (tourism app with virtual and augmented reality exploratory experiences), and Change (mobile and web-based telehealth platform) gave demos of their platforms and answered insightful questions from panelists.

A common thread amongst the founders is a commitment to building their platforms and businesses in the USVI. We asked them to tell us more about why they selected the Virgin Islands as their hub and what they see for the future of tech in our community.

When asked what are three things the team at VI Crawl hope to accomplish while growing their business in the VI?

Khalarni Rivers, Co-Founder, VI Crawl said, "The three things we hope to accomplish while growing our business in the VI are simple and hits close to home. We hope to build meaningful connections with our community, showcase the excellence of VI culture and history, and show the world that our islands have more to offer than just sun, sand, and sea."

Khalid Saleem, co-founder, Boomerang Eats, said why he thinks more people should establish their headquarters in the USVI. "Because we are loyal, warm, and creative patrons looking to develop our community."

Tarik McMillian, Co-Founder, Greater Changes, has high-expectations for the future of tech in the VI and how it will affect our community. "The territory will be in a unique position to learn from the mistakes of others and improve the lives of many with technological solutions to the problems that we have in the Virgin Islands. We also see the future of tech in the VI requiring as well as resulting in a fundamental shift in the way we educate our students," he said. "This tech-enabled future will require that there is a heavier emphasis on STEAM and entrepreneurship in our curricula. With this as a foundation, tech in the VI has the potential to address pain points in the way we do business, access health care and information, collect data, purchase and sell goods and services, and hold people accountable."

Entrepreneur Associates Amanda Spann and Alfonso Rodriguez were also critical to the success of the Pre-Accelerator, according to the release. The RTPark said it is thrilled to have been a part of the early development of these innovative companies and we will be by their side as they continue to grow.

“Where else can a group of forward-thinking, innovative Virgin Islanders go to receive this type of exposure to building a tech or tech-enabled startup? We’re providing exposure to tech-based entrepreneurship,” Mr. Sonnier said. “This experience is about the learning process more than it is about the outcome after 12 weeks. We have to create a culture of building and experimenting without fear of failure. A culture of trying new things.”

The RTPark said it is proud that VISTA+ and the Pre-Accelerator are programs that provide direct community support and impact "as we continue to build a resilient workforce and strong entrepreneurship ecosystem."