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UVI Student Makes History as Part of First Ever 'White House HBCU Week' Special White House Briefing

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UVI communications student George Francis made history last week as a participant in a special White House briefing, according to UVI. By. THE UNIVERSITY OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS

A University of the Virgin Islands communications student made history last week as a participant in a special White House briefing, UVI has announced.

UVI senior communications major and contributing writer for UVIVoice 2.0, George Francis, joined other student journalists from 21 Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in a virtual White House briefing with Deputy Principal Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre on Sept. 10. In the half-hour live streamed event, Francis had the opportunity to directly interview Jean-

Pierre as a professional journalist in a White House press conference.

The event was part of the first ever "White House HBCU Week," held in collaboration with the White House Initiative on HBCUs. The week's activities marked debut demonstrations of initiatives put forth by the new administration, UVI said.

According to the release, Jean-Pierre interacted with student journalists in a question-and-answer format. Each student interaction averaged four minutes and schools were called in alphabetical order, with UVI being last on the list.

"I was humbled to be granted this opportunity to interview the deputy press secretary from our nation's highest office," said Francis. "To be quite honest, I was really nervous as I sat waiting for my name to be called, but I knew I would have to do my best to represent the Territory, my University, the Communication Department and our student newspaper, UVIVOICE 2.0."

When Francis was called on to interview Jean-Pierre, he asked, "My class at UVI is reading a book entitled Diversity Matters in the 21st century which includes a chapter about you, the BLM Movement and Anglophone African-Caribbean Impact. We have discussed your blueprint for activism and sections from your book "Moving Forward". Might you expand on your thoughts that topics such as mental illness, depression and suicide must be acknowledged as serious social ills in communities of color and become part of a larger dialogue in mainstream society?" Before giving her answer, Jean-Pierre expressed surprise and said, "Wow. I did not know about this...[book] Diversity Matters. It's good to know I'm included in that."

Francis later explained, "These are topics that aren't addressed as much as they should be in communities of color, so I wanted to know what the current administration was doing to address them." Jean-Pierre asserted that "the [Biden] administration takes these issues very seriously," and that the president recently signed a proclamation where "he proposed \$180 billion to fund suicide prevention programs at the Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration." She noted that the president also signed the American Rescue Plan into law, and stated "...our nation's youth has been especially vulnerable to the mental health impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic."

Before serving as principal deputy press secretary, Jean-Pierre served as chief of staff for then vice-presidential nominee Kamala Harris. She also worked on Biden's presidential campaign and was a senior advisor and spokesperson for Moveon.org. Earlier this year, Jean-Pierre made history by becoming the second black woman to lead a formal White House press briefing, and the first in 30 years.

According to UVI, the four-day HBCU virtual conference hosted events that focused on education, STEM careers and opportunities, infrastructure and federal programs. Francis was part of the first White House briefing organized primarily for HBCU student journalists, however, officials hinted that other programs of this nature are planned for the future.

"Hopefully, when the White House opens back up, we can have you all physically here," said Erica P. Loewe, director of African American Media at the White House and organizer of this press briefing.

