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Through the Fire They Came Out Glowing: UVI Class of 2022 Rises Above Pandemic, Implored to be Bold and Courageous

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Ernice Gilbert **May 14, 2022**

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A member of UVI's 2022 graduating class expresses excitement after receiving her degree during the commencement ceremony on St. Croix on Fri. May 13, 2022. By. REEMY-REEMZ PHOTOGRAPHY/VICONSORTIUM

On their faces, copious pride and joy was evident in both St. Thomas and St. Croix this week, as nearly 300 University of the Virgin Islands graduates made their way on stage to receive their degrees, including for the first time six students who completed the university's master of art in social work program.

But their successful journey was no *fait accompli*. On the contrary, for most in this year's graduating class, the journey was interrupted midway by an unanticipated pandemic that shook the world's core, upending everything from work to education, and forcing people of all walks of life to become flexible in a suddenly unpredictable world.

"It's a happy day for the parents, friends, and supporters of our graduates because you get to witness them walk across this stage in live and living color," UVI President Dr. David Hall said on Friday to the 100 graduates on St. Croix. A selfsame event took place on the St. Thomas campus Thursday. "It's a happy day for the graduates; you have earned your degree under some of the most challenging of circumstances, and you have done what no other UVI class has done which is complete the final two years and two months of your academic journey during a pandemic that required you to study, learn and excel in circumstances you have never encountered before."

Regarding the six students who completed UVI's master of art in social work program, Mr. Hall said, "You are making history for the University of the Virgin Islands." He explained that the 32nd Legislature due in part to the advocacy of Senator Kurt Vialet passed a bill that provided funding for UVI to launch the program. That bill was signed into law by then-Governor Kenneth Mapp.

The UVI president told students who earned degrees from doctorates to bachelors, that it was their turn to contribute to the world's betterment. "Inspire yourself and others to be better than what you are," he said. "We charge you to be bold, courageous, creative representatives of the University of the Virgin Islands — you are the best evidence that we are getting it right. Whatever you do, good or bad in part will be attributable to us and whatever we do as an institution will be attributable to you. So as a collective family we both have an obligation to always do our best."

Keynote speaker Dr. Robert Franklin Jr., the former president of Morehouse College, challenged the graduates to go beyond decency and character and become morale leaders. "We hope that you will be successful in all you do, but I want to add this: I hope you consider being a moral leader, not just a person of character and decency who tells the truth and keeps your promises. Yes, you should do that at least," Mr. Franklin said as he explained the concept to the graduates. "What I am suggesting is that you can be a moral leader, one who invites other persons to become a better version of themselves, one who speaks truth to power, one who stands up for the least advantaged members of the community."

He implored the graduates not to give up on life when faced with challenges, reminding them that the world breaks everyone, and afterward many stand strong in the broken places. "You can go forth in anything that you wish and if you fail remember... Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try Again. Fail again. Fail better," Mr. Franklin said quoting Samuel Beckett, the Irish novelist, playwright and short story writer, whose famous quote has become a mantra of sorts in the tech startup world, where a high rate of companies flounder.

Senate Vice President Novelle Francis called on the graduates to be catalysts for positive change. "Most importantly, be deliberate about paying it forward in your community," he said.

Governor Albert Bryan told the graduates that they now belong to the 17 percent of Virgin Islanders who have an advanced degree, and that their job is not to assimilate with existing rules. "Your job is not to fit in ...make yourself uncomfortable, don't agree to what is going on. When they tell you, 'you know we does always do it this way,' tell them that is why the Virgin Islands is still the mess that it is... there is nobody who has not done anything great that was not laughed at," he said.

“Everything that is remarkable in this life started with a crazy man or woman. Be the crazy man or woman...one thing for sure, if we continue doing things the same way we will get the same results. Embrace change,” Mr. Bryan told the graduates.

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