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Amps Business Retreat Heads to St. Thomas Following Success on St. Croix

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High school and college students participated in the Amps Entrepreneurship Leadership Institute Retreat last week at Sejah Farm.

Twenty high school and college students braved heavy downpour on St. Croix last week, hoping to gain experience in business development in the agriculture sector through an educational initiative hosted by the Amps Entrepreneurship Leadership Institute Retreat.

“We knew after that experience that we had something good here ...They have a different mindset now about what entrepreneurship is about. Even if they don’t get into business and run a business, employers will have different type of students,” remarked CEO and Founder of Amps International LLC, James Amps.

The students had been chosen to participate in a pitch competition that required them to create businesses in agriculture conservation and to create partnerships with farmers and business owners in that field.

They were trained to step into the mindset of an entrepreneur and after 30 hours of training, Alexander Pahlavan, Yvonne Parris, Keturah Nelson, Ameer Norman, and Anabelle Garcia won the first place \$900 prize with their pitch "Cultivating the Future".

Winning team information:

- Alexander Pahlavan - 18 years old - Free Will Baptist Christian School
- Yvonne Parris – 18 years old - graduated HS
- Keturah Nelson - 20 years old - University of the Virgin Islands
- Ameer Norman - 15 years old - Central High School
- Anabelle Garcia - 17 years old Career Technical Educational Center - (CTEC)

Their company was created to market the work and challenges of farmers in the U.S Virgin Islands and to connect the community to farmers through storytelling and social media.

They advanced over the other teams because of the feasibility of startup costs. The implementation of their concept could be as simple as visiting a farm and using their cell phones to edit stories and share it on social media platforms to get started.

Their pitch also highlights the significant demand and interest in Agritourism, a form of commercial enterprise that links agricultural production and/or processing with tourism to attract visitors onto a farm, ranch, or other agricultural business, according to the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture.

Mr. Amp said all students were provided with guidelines on what to look for – like effective communication, how to identify a potential business opportunity and how to determine its feasibility.

Sommer Angelique Sibilly-Brown, the founder and executive director of the Virgin Islands Good Food Coalition, was so impressed by the business idea of ‘Cultivating the Future’ that she wanted to fund it, according to Mr. Amp.

To assist with the process, he said, “Our next move for them is to get their business registered and to get them in with Sommer Sibilly-Brown ... they fell in love not only with that one but with all four of the companies.”

Over the next year, Mr. Amps through his institute intends to hold virtual meetings with all the participating students. Each student will also be awarded a year-long mentorship with professionals from South Florida and across the U.S.

The initiative stems from a partnership between Mr. Amps’s company and the USDA-NRCS and aims to expose young people to entrepreneurship opportunities surrounding conservation.

“They wanted to keep homegrown talent in the Virgin Islands and what better way for them to keep talent than for them to actually get involved in youth,” he stated.

The competition was held at the Melvin Evans Center at the University of the Virgin Islands, where students competed for cash prizes: 1st place \$900; 2nd place \$700; 3rd place \$500; 4th place \$400.

On this particular retreat, students worked with Sejah Farm and other local farmers to discover their struggles, some of their biggest issues, help with managing data, accounting, securing grants available to them and conserving water.

Following the St. Croix retreat, some students from the U.S. mainland are also expected to be invited to attend the next retreat in 2023.

In February 2023, the institute will travel to St. Thomas to recruit between 20 to 25 students. Plans are also afoot to replicate those efforts in Puerto Rico.

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