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Amps Institute Entrepreneurial Retreat Focused on Agriculture Wins Praise From St. Thomas Participants

Agriculture / **Published On February 26, 2023 07:06 AM /**

Elesha George **February 26, 2023**

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Earlier this month, the Amps Entrepreneurship Leadership Institute trained 25 high school and college students on St. Thomas during a weekend at the University of the Virgin Islands' School of Agriculture. Participants worked alongside farmers and business owners to create business ideas centered around youth entrepreneurship in the agricultural field.

UVI English major Howard Jones told Consortium journalists that he became interested in agriculture a few years ago when he was a camp counselor. That spark led him to participate in the Amps retreat which he said resets the mindset of young people interested in business. “They bring that push that starts the passion... We had good ideas both this time and last time that could easily become major businesses down here if they got a good push and funding,” he said.

Today, Mr. Jones works at Smart Life Farms – a U.S.-based company that grows crops using vertical farming methods, which require less resources and take up less land space. “I’ve never had a job fulfill me like this,” he said, recalling that they’ve so far been harvesting several pounds of lettuce every few weeks in addition to other crops. He believes that this type of farming should be encouraged, particularly on St. Thomas.

“The issues St. Thomas has when it comes to agriculture is that we have to deal with ... natural elements like dryness, bugs, heat. There are so many things affecting agriculture ... and make us not competitive on that scene,” Mr. Jones noted.

He said agriculture is an untapped industry that young people can explore if they are serious about food security and the sustainability of the Virgin Islands. “Unexplored territory — like we learned in the Amps Institute — that means money. ... There’s the whole issue of how we have so much [sic] expenses in terms of buying food because all of it has to be imported.”

Kayla Bellew, an Amps Institute ambassador in her senior year at high school, was especially fond of the group projects. “When we first got there, I was a little nervous. I was excited to be a part of the program but when I heard ‘intensive’, I got a little nervous,” she recalled.

Those nerves slowly went away when she started speaking with her group members about what their business idea would be. “They were very nice,” she remembered.

As part of the retreat, Amps institute hosts a business idea competition among the students. The groups with the most practical ideas win cash prizes.

“We were at Sejah Farms and they went into detail about what they did and we decided that we can help the farmers by pollinating their crops with bees and we brought in our flowers and took flowers and weeds from their farms to make bouquets,” she explained.

Ms. Bellew’s team placed third. She said she was proud of her achievement and was grateful for the opportunity to work with her peers. “I felt that we got connected to each other and we still talk now and I like that about the program. ... I feel like it helped a lot because I learned many things about being a business owner,” she said.

Azia Claxton was part of the winning team, whose idea was to use earthworms to manufacture an organic soil fertilizer, which they would sell locally, within the Caribbean region and on the mainland. “By mixing natural dirt with biodegradable components, they turned all of it into very healthy fertilizer for plants,” he shared.

The plan included setting up earthworm bins in areas where compostable foods are most thrown out, such as schools and nursing homes.

Mr. Claxton told the Consortium that, like Ms. Bellew, he particularly enjoyed the personal connections that were forged during the weekend together. “One of my favorite things to do is to make connections because it helps me out in the long run and going to St. Thomas, I made a lot of wonderful connections with a lot of wonderful people. Actually, one of the St. Thomas participants is currently one of my best friends,” he explained.

According to Claxton, he’s been to many retreats “but this one was different” because it gave him more in-depth insight into what farming is truly about. “This one was more about brainstorming. It was hard but it was fun to do because it was interesting. They had a lot of information and I learnt a lot of things,” he said.

Luis Cruz-Arroyo, Caribbean Area Director for the U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service, said this type of training for youth is important and rewarding because it broadens their career choices while helping their countries come independent in food production. “We all want to do better for our countries, for our states or for wherever we come from and this is definitely an avenue that’s very rewarding because whatever you do, you’re not only impacting a farmer or yourselves, you’re impacting communities. ... You’re providing access to clean water, good nutritious food and you’re making sure that the economy in those countries is thriving.”

Mr. Cruz-Arroyo, one of the mentors who accompanied the students on the retreat, said he encouraged them to think outside the box of what they know farming to be, and to explore more administrative opportunities that embrace artificial intelligence and other types of technologies. He described agriculture as the “maximum expression of science application,” saying, “You apply chemistry, physics, any type of social science and to me it’s a very gratifying and rewarding career. ... A lot of students, if they know the amount of science and technology that’s in agriculture, they would change their perspective.”

James Amps, founder of Amps Institute said his partners were impressed with the progress the students made over the 30 hours spent at UVI.

“It was an eye-opener for us to watch them change their mindsets from where they started to where they actually ended-up,” he said, noting in particular that St. Thomas had less of an agricultural economy than St. Croix, where the program was first conducted in the USVI last year.

The students who participated in this month’s retreat will receive mentorship for a year, to help them build on what they have learned and further their business ideas where possible.