



left to right: Kenrick Quashie, Gail Moaney, Tania Cruz, Feliza Fenty, Kim Diaz Allen

Virgin Gorda Youth Leader Speaks at Caribbean Conference

Youth leaders from across the Caribbean had a unique experience of speaking directly with leaders of tourism industry, media, alternative energy and development. The Caribbean Media Exchange on Sustainable Tourism (CMEx) held its first youth panel called Keeping It Real at their May 15-19 conference in San Juan, PR. There were 17 youth delegates among the hundred strong participant base from the Caribbean (English, French, Spanish and Dutch), Europe, North, Central and South America. While young people have served as delegates at past conferences, this was their first chance to share their thoughts, concerns, actions and goals for their future with the prestigious leaders and conference participants.

“Caribbean public and private sector leaders were very impressed,” said Dr. Basil Springer, Chairman Counterpart Caribbean. “These youth leaders have a vision for the future of their islands. It’s imperative that the leaders of our islands invest in our young people now so together we can build a more sustainable economy.”

“In the year 2020 we will be the leaders of our island,” said Tania Cruz, “What do we want for our lives and for the future of our island?” Ms. Cruz presented the Vieques Youth Leadership Initiative’s 2020 Report on Sustainable Tourism that outlines a five-point strategy and a comprehensive plan. It is the culmination of a four-year demonstration project with the Stone Soup Leadership Institute.

Virgin Gorda youth Feliza Fenty, shared about the Virgin Gorda Youth Leadership Initiative (VGYLI) program. An aspiring TV journalist, Feliza is eager to find ways to use the power of the media to promote sustainable tourism. She recently surveyed eighty people in the BVI about their perceptions of their environment. She was concerned that while students in the United Kingdom must watch the environmental documentary, *The Inconvenient Truth* by Al Gore, many BVI students had never heard of it. “While the truth is inconvenient, we must each do our part,” she said. “Before you throw that soda can in the road, think twice. We can be a shining example.”

St. Vincent youth delegate Kenrick Quashie expressed a sense of urgency for to get more young people involved in sustainable tourism and development. “We just can’t wait!” he explained. He invited VGYLI youth to participate in a regional conference for youth leaders to “create a Caribbean crusade for sustainable tourism.”

“Sustainable tourism is the keystone industry for the Caribbean: we need to invest in the three key elements of social, economic and environmental,” said Senator Allen Chastanet, St. Lucia's Minister of Tourism and Civil Aviation and Chairman of the Caribbean Tourism Organization (CTO). “The times are changing. It’s time to stop the debate. It’s time for action. Let’s try to make it work.” Chastanet cited tourism innovations in Mexico who embraced tourism twenty years and have created an economic miracle. The Senator recently returned from Dubai – where they are investing heavily in tourism development. It was noted Dubai is investing \$10 billion for youth development to “inspire knowledge, ideas and innovation among the builders of tomorrow’s world.”

Youth delegates from eight other Caribbean islands also learned from leaders about the complex issues facing the Caribbean tourism industry – from skyrocketing fuel prices and concerns of losing market share to global competition. They also heard about innovative solutions such as brand marketing, renewable energy projects, satellite accounting systems, creating unique Caribbean island experiences, producing indigenous arts and crafts, investing in entrepreneurship training and opportunities, and linkages with the Diaspora. “The Diaspora represents a multi-million dollar opportunity for the Caribbean, and maximizing the financial, intellectual and creative potential of this market took center stage,” said CMEx conference coordinator Bevan Springer under the theme "Embracing the Diaspora, Connecting Communities."

Ms. Fenty was most impressed by Nevis Minister Carlisle Powell’s presentation on the Island’s Geo-Thermal Energy Program. “After years of study to determine that Nevis was in fact an ideal location, we are finally moving forward with this project and will produce power by July 2009,” said the Minister. Given rising fuel costs and their implication on the Caribbean islands, it’s good to know their program will reduce energy costs from 30-50% in a few years. “The best news is that the project isn’t costing the Island anything, thanks to investors from Germany, in-kind support of economist and engineer from OECS, plus technical assistance from UNIDO.”

“What can we do to make tourism more sustainable?” asked St. Lucia youth delegate Sarah Munn, “Just giving people more information isn’t enough to make people care.” Vieques Youth Leadership Initiative delegate Kimberly Diaz Allen responded, “We must walk the talk so that we can be an example as we transfer this knowledge to the younger generation.”

“Given the challenges we are facing in the Caribbean and around the world, it’s time for action,” said Gail Moaney, Executive VP Travel and Economic Development, Ruder Finn and Board member of Counterpart International who served as moderator of the CMEx youth panel. “These youth have a vision and are taking action. They are in inspiration to us all.”

VGyli’s mission is to inspire young people and give them the tools and training to develop their full potential, broaden their horizons, strengthen their character and develop their leadership abilities so they can positively contribute to a better future for their community. Our goal is to develop a comprehensive leadership program that provides educational and training opportunities; collaborates with other VG/BVI organizations; catalyzes community projects; and develops public-private partnerships to prepare Virgin Gorda youth to become leaders of the 21st century. VGyli thanks its May sponsors: Counterpart International, Ministry of Education & Culture, Office of the Governor of the British Virgin Islands, H. Lavity Stoutt Community College Virgin Gorda campus, A Dream Come True Villa, Bitter End Yacht Club, Brown Williams, jetBlue, Mineshaft Café and the Stone Soup Leadership Institute.

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