



Virgin Gorda's Young Environmental Stewards

It's amazing what happens when young people experience the beauty of their own islands! "I really saw "Nature's Little Secrets" through a whole new lens," said Lakeisha Reneta Gerald. "I overcame my fear of the deep blue and the 'unknown.'" Thanks to Joe Standish of Patouche Charters, it was much more than a boat trip – it was an environmental education. On Sunday, July 8 twenty young people from Virgin Gorda learned how The Baths got their name and how they were formed from an earthquake, not a volcano. The only other place in the world with such huge boulders is the Seychelles Islands off the coast of Africa. They traveled to Horshoe Reef near Eustatia Island to snorkel around the Wreck of the Rhone and even dive down to see the canons used in the movie, *In the Deep*.

For some, it was their first time snorkeling. They were nervous, some afraid of what lies in the seas. They were delighted to see beautiful schools of fish, stingrays, barracuda and turtles living in the coral reefs., "God's creation is amazing!" exclaimed Jadine Matthias after her first look. "We really need to stop underestimating the island – and the everyday road that we travel on. Take a look at your own backyard. It's gorgeous!" For some, it was their first time out in the open ocean. "When I finally went into the water, I realized I was born in a really beautiful place that lots of people travel to see and experience," said Nakisha Warner. "Nature has blessed us with world attractions of The Baths and the 3rd largest reef in the world." Venner Williams said, "When I saw the bottom of the ocean for the first time, I experienced one of the greatest feelings in my life – which is real happiness." For some it was life changing. "I've seen these fish on television, but never in real life. I felt like I was on television. Take a tip from Maggie, "For those of you who think that you should try it, especially if you are stressed out and need to relax, go snorkeling and see how this trip can change your life."

When they passed Savannah Bay, Jassiem Maynard told about the two-year Sandwatch project done by ROMPS students from Robinson O'Neal Primary School. "We measured the effects of global warming and climate changes from hot sea temperatures in 2005 which bleached the coral reef in front of the Bay. We took before and after photos of the reef and when the seas rose and we lost ½ meter of our beach." The environmental field trip was organized by the Virgin Gorda Youth Leadership Initiative. It was much more than just a day on a boat. It was a great way to expand young minds to the environment and how they can protect it for future generations. "I learned that many reefs are dying because of erosion and bad anchorage," said Lindon Clarke. "I learned how I can help educate others including our tourists who sail around our islands."

VGyli is collaborating with other BVI organizations, inviting them to nominate young people. Mrs. Lauralee Maynard invited a new group of young people from Save Our Youth. “As someone who works for the BVI Tourism Board, it was an opportunity to socialize with people I didn’t know and help them snorkel for the first time,” said Kyle Harrigan. “It created a bond between us.”

Later that week at H. Lavity Stout Community College’s Virgin Gorda campus, these young people talked about the lessons they learned on the trip and how they can apply them to their lives. “This trip opened my eyes and helped me a lot,” says Maggie Mack. “When I jumped off the boat, I actually overcame my fears of heights and realized I can be adventurous.” “I was scared and frightened, then I realized, I can do it! and then I had fun,” wrote Lakeisha Reneta Gerald. “Knowledge is power.” “Knowing, seeing, believing – knowing is seeing and seeing is believing!”

They practiced their writing and presentation skills and shared important life lessons. “It’s normal to be scared about doing something for the first time, but it isn’t a reason not to do something,” wrote Venner Williams. “Once I put my mind to something, I can do anything, face my goals do and don’t be afraid -- perseverance, hard work and faith.” Some were poetic, some profound. “Always put your best foot forward, ask God for guidance and always believe in yourself,” wrote Latoya George. Some balanced each other: “Instead of looking for the easy way out, go for the challenges,” wrote Ezron Simmons; for Lindon Clarke “When the waters get too rough, don’t quit just move onto calmer waters.”

To give back to their island, VGYLI youth researched summer activities for all young people in Virgin Gorda. They made a flier and posted it around town. “Shakespeare said there are four things that don’t come back -- and an opportunity is #1. We have our dreams and they are real. My dream is to become a day care manager and teacher. With this opportunity, we can fulfill our dreams,” said Jadine.

The Virgin Gorda Youth Leadership Initiative evolved from a community planning process held with people from business, churches, education, government and youth who are concerned about the island’s youth. *In order for Virgin Gorda and the BVI to effectively address the emerging challenges of the 21st century, there is an urgent need to invest in the island’s next generation of leaders. Young people must be identified, trained, rewarded and given incentives to return to the islands to contribute to our social, economic and environmental wellbeing of the Island.* 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. VGYLI is a year-round fellowship program where young people receive mentors, internships and/or job training as well as opportunities to practice their leadership skills by working with younger students and developing projects within their organizations, churches and communities. The VGYLI community planning process, training and ongoing technical assistance is provided by the Stone Soup Leadership Institute’s Executive Director Marianne Larned and their team. People in the community who’ve donated in-kind contributions are L&S Car Rentals, Speedy’s Car Rentals, Dr. and Mrs. Kirk Kanter, Air Sunshine, The Mineshaft Café, The Bitter End Yacht Club with special thanks to Dr. Almein O’Neal for her support at HLSCC. Early support for VGYLI came from Germaine Fritz, A Dream Come True Villa Rentals of Virgin Gorda.

“It was a pleasure to spend the afternoon with such respectful young people from Virgin Gorda who were eager to learn about how to preserve our islands,” said Joe Standish who provided mementos to award them. “They are on their way to becoming environmental stewards. We look forward to working with them to create a future for the BVI that will be brighter because of them.” Given that the Caribbean islands are on the front line of climate change and global warming, VGYLI is dedicated to sustainable development. Who better than young people to be the champions of preserving these beautiful islands? Feliza Fenty summed up her experience as awesome, creation and enlightening. “Since I want to be a journalist, I will write about the environment so I can encourage people to care.”