



VYLI's Cultural & Entrepreneurship Initiative Tortola, BVI March 2006

From the moment they landed at Tortola's Beef Island Airport, you knew they were champions. These Vieques youth and their fearless leaders were on a mission, so they grabbed their gear and embarked on a life-changing adventure. They had been working together for several months – and it showed.

The Vieques Youth Leadership Initiative (VYLI) was proud to be the first to represent Vieques and all of Puerto Rico in the 3rd annual Caribbean Artisan Festival. They were honored to be the first young people to participate with artisans from ten Caribbean countries. They knew little about the BVI or other Caribbean islands except what they'd read in history books. They were eager to learn from this fascinating adventure.

VYLI trains young and emerging leaders to make their dreams come true and help build a new Vieques. During weekly after-school sessions with VYLI's Cultural-Entrepreneurship Initiative, young people (ages 11-17) worked with Vieques artisans to research their own Taino culture. They developed an appreciation for their island's uniqueness and its historic connection with other Caribbean nations. They also learned to design unique jewelry combining shells and wooden beads with bright colorful ones. In addition to honing their artistic skills; they studied with local and New York designers; trained in sales and customer relations; practiced speaking English and learned about running a small business from VYLI's national partner National Foundation for Teaching Entrepreneurship. In just four months, they created and sold \$3,000 of hand-made jewelry and VYLI T-shirts to help fund their trip.

Sixteen-year-old Kassandra Castillo Cruz started making jewelry with her family when she was just six. As she works on her dream of being a model, Kassandra has an eye for high fashion. Designing beautiful pieces comes naturally to 15-year old Jose Padilla Alejandro, whose dream is to be an actor. As an accomplished singer, 13-year-old Carmen Rosa knows what looks great on stage. Eleven-year-old Lia Faltz's dream is to be a fashion designer – and she has a knack for creating the VYLI display. It was at VYLI's 2nd annual Summer Institute, that Lia first started to make her dream come true. The youngest member of our team, she has been warmly welcomed by youth of all ages. Her 12-year-old friend, Valerie Serrano wasn't able to come, Lia promised to bring her back gifts from their trip.



When they arrived, they were warmly greeted by the BVI Tourism Board – and Buster's taxi service. After checking into Hodge's Creek Inn, they were whisked away to the prestigious H.S. Lavery Stoutt College. As honored guests of President Michael O'Neal and the College's Technology Center, they participated in their first video conference with people in Missouri. They were fascinated to discover how people from different cultures and thousand of miles apart can connect thanks to the power of technology. Everyone was touched by their beautiful singing, the universal language of music helped bridge their two languages. VYLI youth fondly remember Sergio's special friendship handshake and share it with friends back home.



Earlier that day, Vieques Mayor Damaso Serrano Lopez and an economic development delegation arrived for a historic meeting with BVI Chief Minister Orlando Smith. The Mayor presented an economic report with a photographic book on Vieques -- and an invitation for a BVI delegation to visit Vieques. VYLI youth leaders Josue Cruz and Eliasib Utreras presented a background package on VYLI's Technology Initiative – and an invitation for BVI youth to attend VYLI's 3rd annual Summer Institute. VYLI youth were then invited to participate in the Chief Minister's Sailing Regatta in July, 2006. The Mayor and his delegation then joined VYLI youth for the College's reception where they were welcomed by Banco Popular Vice President Ian Smith.



The next morning, VYLI youth quickly set up their official Festival booth so they could participate with the Mayor in the prestigious Opening Ceremonies. Seated in the front row in their VYLI T-shirts, they heard leaders speak about the importance of nurturing indigenous artisans to preserve the Caribbean Islands' unique culture and improve its economic well-being. To close the ceremonies, Carmen sang with a Spanish ballad -- receiving a standing ovation.



Later that night, everyone was invited to the College's gala event with the Leipzig String Quartet from Vienna. VYLI youth changed into their best clothes for their first high-culture experience, they learned classical music etiquette. After that they were ready for a normal teenage feast of hamburgers and french fries with playful dancing.



That Saturday was a very busy day. While selling their jewelry and VYLI T-shirts, these young people served as powerful ambassadors to curious tourists from all over the world. VYLI's educational display with photos of their activities, they described our projects with over 50 young people. They answered the often-asked question: "Where is Vieques?" by pointing to a photographic book and Caribbean maps. They invited customers to come visit their island – and sign the Guest Book so they would receive the new VYLI newsletter. People were so impressed by their enthusiastic presentations that VYLI was invited to participate in other events in places as

far away as Montreal, Canada. That night, the Mayor hosted VYLI youth and leaders at a special dinner and birthday celebration at the New England Culinary Institute's restaurant at Fort Burt. For the first time in their lives, these young people were treated as VIP's – and had the opportunity to share their dreams for their life and their future with the Island's leaders.



The next day, these young artisans visited with and learned from Caribbean artisans at the Festival. Jacob from St. Vincent and Bequia who creates colorful handicrafts from recycled beach trash; Danne and other basket-weavers from Dominica; Sabinus and his hand-carved calabash bowls from St. Lucia; Janice and bright batik clothing from Trinidad and Paula's generous gift of abalone shells. They loved the Caribbean music from Johnnie's drummers and dancers. They were most inspired by Aquila, a Trinidadian who calls herself a "reforester." She plants seeds, cultivates new forests, then harvests the seeds and makes jewelry from all-natural beads. Beautifully dressed in her traditional West African costume, Aquila served as a powerful role model for our young women. She took time to teach Vieques youth about the specific names of each seed she used in her jewelry. They were especially thrilled to see how she used the same flamboyant seeds they'd been experimenting with in their own jewelry-making to create exquisite necklaces with matching earrings. They also learned that by oiling the seeds they could preserve and brighten their colors. VYLI youth invited these artisans to share their talents at the upcoming 3rd annual Summer Institute



From these experienced artisans, VYLI youth experienced quality craftsmanship; learned to appreciate the time involved in producing handicrafts (vs. store-bought items). They discovered how to maximize their display so potential buyers could best see their products. And they learned about the fine art of seeing what sells in different markets. The Festival's home base of Trellis Bay is a hub of a sophisticated travelers from the charter sailing industry who eagerly bought VYLI's jewelry and t-shirts. When the Festival traveled to other BVI venues such as Craft Alive in Road Town and Spanish-town in Virgin Gorda, there were more curious locals than active shoppers. Before departing for Vieques, the VYLI team visited the tent storefronts of vendors hawking their wares to the cruise ships. Interestingly, they noted that while their prices were less, so was their quality – and their joy. Buying cheaply-made products from Indonesia, China and Taiwan from people in the Caribbean seemed just like shopping in a mall -- and not as much fun.

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Thanks to Sun Sail, VYLI youth also had their first sailing experience. It was an adventurous day. On the ride over, some insisted on going “below” – and learned first-hand about the dangers on queasy stomachs. When they arrived at The Baths in Virgin Gorda, they regained their energy – and jumped into the dingy to go ashore. For the last few months, they’d had swimming lessons at Richard and Freya’s pool. So when the dingy anchored nearby, they confidently swam to the beach. Hiking through Devil’s Bay and exploring these huge boulders reminded them of Vieques’ own historic rocks at Puerto Ferro.



After hours of hiking, swimming and playing on the beach, Vieques youth were joined by a large group of young people from Tortola. Shy at first, they introduced themselves by sharing their dreams. The Tortola youth were impressed that the Vieques youth had given so much thought to what they wanted from their lives. They eagerly joined together for some great photos – and promised to visit each other again someday – maybe even for VYLI’s Summer Institute in June.

On the return trip, Sun Sail’s Captain Chris offered to teach Vieques youth how to sail. Jose was most eager to learn – standing on the bow, searching for land, he looked like a pro. He knows that as an aspiring actor, he just might be able to supplement his income by crewing on a boat near Hollywood. He also learned how this eco-friendly water sport is good for tourism and the environment. Jose is looking forward to Captain Chris coming to Vieques to teach sailing to more young people.

Before visiting Tortola, VYLI youth were dismayed to learn there were no MacDonalD’s on the island. Like most Vieques youth, their first stop when landing on the main Island of Puerto Rico is to find fast food. So, it was a risky chance to bring them to Roti’s Palace for their last meal in Tortola –where they experienced yet another first – roti, the tasty West Indian staple with curried fish or meats wrapped in tortillas. With all the love from 75-year-old Chef Jean, it really was no surprise that they fell in love with rotis (even sneaking some back through U.S Customs for their families!)

Upon their return to Vieques, VYLI youth were full of happy memories and inspiring stories where they made presentations to their teachers and classrooms. They were fascinated by all the different cultures, music, food, languages and accents -- even driving on left side of the road. Their minds were opened and they were inspired to design new handicrafts. “Who would think that you could make a purse from recycled juice boxes?” They are now motivated to make and sell more so they can travel to other places. Most of all, they appreciated how special they were treated by everyone they met. Awards were presented on March 22:

Most Improved Presentation: Lia Faltz
 Most Unique Designs: Kassandra Castillo Cruz
 Most Improved English: Carmen Rosa
 Best Sailor: Jose Padillo Alejandro
 Best Photographer: Eliasib Utreras
 Best Presentation: Josue Cruz
 Best Project Coordinator: Betsy Ayala
 Best Partnership Developer: Lynda Byron
 Most Impressed Mom: Denise Abreu

VYLI youth served as true ambassadors for a new Vieques. They made new friends; created new partnerships; connected Vieques with other Caribbean islands and inspired them to engage their youth in next year’s Festival; and learned how to preserve their unique Caribbean culture and economic well-being. We are most grateful to all our sponsors especially the BVI Tourism Board for their support.

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