GOVERNMENT OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS

PRESS RELEASE

Tel: (284)468-2730
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Youth Engagement at the Centre of Future Emancipation Festivities

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The Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sustainable Development is placing youth engagement at the centre of its efforts to preserve and advance the Territory's cultural heritage.

This is in keeping with the 2026 Culture and Tourism Month theme, *“Our BVI, Our Culture, Our Story.”*. The ministry recently convened a panel discussion to give young people an opportunity to reflect on the 2026 Virgin Islands Emancipation Festivities and contribute their perspectives on the future of the Territory's cultural celebrations.

The discussion titled, *“Student Reflections on the 2026 BVI Emancipation Festivities,”* was held through an engagement between the Ministry and students enrolled in Personal Development for College Success (COM100) at the H. Lavity Stoutt Community College (HLSCC). Approximately 100 students participated in the exercise, which provided an opportunity for them to critically examine the activities, organisation, cultural representation and overall experiences of this year's festivities.

The timing of the engagement was deliberate as the Territory observes Culture and Tourism Month under the theme, *“Our BVI, Our Culture, Our Story.”* The discussion provided a practical opportunity to bring that message to life by encouraging young people to examine their cultural experiences, connect with their history and recognise their role in preserving and shaping The Virgin Islands story for future generations.

The idea emerged from discussions at the Festival Forums held earlier in 2026, which provided opportunities for stakeholders and members of the public to share perspectives on the development and future direction of the Territory's festivals.

Junior Minister for Culture and Tourism Honourable Luce Hodge-Smith participated in a panel discussion alongside Director of Youth Affairs and Sports Ms. Debra Hodge. Honourable Hodge-Smith welcomed the suggestion of creating a dedicated opportunity for young people to share their perspectives on the festivals. She agreed that such a discussion should be organised to ensure that the voices of young people were included in the wider conversation about the future of the

Territory's cultural celebrations.

As part of their Culture and Tourism Month exercise, Ms. Hodge and her COM100 students were tasked with reflecting on their experiences during the 2026 Emancipation Festivities and submitting written reflections, questions and concerns to their instructor. These submissions formed the foundation for the panel discussion, allowing the students' own observations and recommendations to guide the engagement.

Among the key areas explored were the decision to separate the Rise-and-Shine Tramp from the August Monday Parade, the balance between contemporary entertainment and traditional Virgin Islands music and folklore, improvements to Coney Island and the Festival Village, and the need to increase youth participation in cultural pageantry.

Students also raised questions about event scheduling, parade coordination, support and visibility for local artistes, and safety and security at festival events. Separately, reflections on the ministry's staging of the East End/Long Look Emancipation Festival, which commemorated 250 years of freedom, brought attention to the importance of strengthening young people's understanding of the historical significance of these community-based celebrations.

Addressing the importance of maintaining the cultural identity of the festivities, Honourable Hodge-Smith emphasised that the celebrations must continue to provide a platform for the Virgin Islands' rich cultural expressions and historical legacy.

“Our Emancipation Festivities must always be more than entertainment. They are an opportunity to tell our story, celebrate our identity and pass on the traditions that make us uniquely Virgin Islanders. As we embrace new forms of entertainment and innovation, we must ensure that our fungi music, folklore, cultural expressions and history remain at the heart of these celebrations. Our young people must understand not only how we celebrate, but why we celebrate,” the Junior Minister said.

Meanwhile, Ms. Hodge emphasised the value of creating opportunities for young people to express their views and actively contribute to the development of cultural programmes and celebrations.

“Young people have valuable perspectives that must be heard and considered in the development of our cultural programmes and national celebrations," Ms. Hodge said, adding, "This engagement allowed students to move beyond simply experiencing the festivities to critically examining them and offering recommendations for improvement. Our responsibility is to create meaningful opportunities for young people to participate, contribute and take ownership of the cultural legacy that they will one day be responsible for preserving."

Youth Advisory Council Proposed

An important aspect of the discussion was a proposal by Ms. Hodge to establish a formal, year-round youth advisory council or feedback mechanism that would provide young people with a direct link to the Virgin Islands Festival and Fairs Committee, allowing them to contribute to festival planning and development beyond the annual celebrations.

As the Territory observes Culture and Tourism Month, the ministry remains committed to creating opportunities that deepen cultural awareness, strengthen community participation and encourage the next generation to take an active role in safeguarding the Territory's heritage.

For Additional Information Contact:

Department of Information and Public Relations
Telephone: 468-2730

Email: gis@gov.vg

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