

Marine Apprentices Celebrate Accomplishments and New Beginnings in Graduation Sail

St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands - Before the Marine Apprenticeship Program, Destiny Frett had never been comfortable in deep open water. On July 24, she was at the helm of the *Princess Grace*, steering a 65-foot catamaran full of guests into a Virgin Islands sunset on the Caribbean Sea as part of the program's graduation sail.

"I didn't even know swimming in deep water was possible," Frett said afterward. "Jumping off a ship with no life jacket during the abandon-ship drill portion of the STCW (Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping) training was one of my greatest fears, and I survived. I feel unstoppable." Now, she said, the water is where she feels most at home: "I love how meditative it feels being on the water, driving the boat, forced to focus on the present moment and how you can always improve it."



Frett at the helm of the *Princess Grace*

Frett was one of eleven young adult Virgin Islanders who graduated that evening from VIPCA's (Virgin Islands Professional Charter Association) four-week Marine Apprenticeship Program, a course designed to open pathways into the marine industry and the wider blue economy. The graduation itself was the final test: aboard the *Princess Grace* — built in St. Croix by Gold Coast Yachts and operated by Cruz Bay Watersports/RED Hospitality — the apprentices ran the lines, gave the safety briefings, handled the guest management, and took the helm for a sunset cruise with invited guests and industry partners.

Since 2018, the program has now trained 100 Virgin Islanders. Over four weeks, apprentices earn ASA (American Sailing Association) 101 Basic Keelboat and Boating Safety certifications and complete STCW Basic Training. Plus, they participated in a Discover SCUBA experience and received hands-on training on sail and power boats, in marine-systems maintenance workshops, and in customer-service and job-readiness training.



Apprentices furl the jib on return

Much of that is possible only because local marine businesses open their docks.

"Offshore Marine is happy to support any program that invests in our youth," said Chris Cilliers, general manager. "Giving young people here their STCW and a first look at the industry is how we build the next generation of marine professionals in the Territory."

payoff is visible on its own boats.

For RED Hospitality & Leisure, the

"We've seen firsthand how many of the program's graduates have built real careers with us, starting out on the beach and working their way all the way up to the captain's chair," said Byron Bell, market director.

Apprentices also worked with UVI CELL and Chef Jucinto Durant on soft skills, from customer service to résumés. "Supporting the Marine Apprenticeship Program is an investment in our future workforce in the Virgin Islands," Durant said.

For some, the four weeks confirmed a calling. "One of the most surprising aspects was the extensive scope and functionality of a boat," said Khymoi Weeks. "My unwavering passion for marine life and boats drove the decision to pursue this industry."

For others, it opened a door. "I love that this program especially gives locals a chance to shine," said Michelle LaPlace. "The marine industry is one of the best out there. There are so many things you can do!"



Nichel and Gabby with Chef Durant

As the Princess Grace returned to Charlotte Amalie, VIPCA Executive Director Kennon Jones handed each graduate a Certificate of Achievement — the end of the training, and the start of new beginnings.

VIPCA runs the Marine Apprenticeship Program with support from the Island Foundation, the Marine Rebuild Fund, FirstBank, and the Community Foundation of the Virgin Islands. Partners include Cruz Bay Watersports, St. Thomas Yacht Club and St. Thomas Sailing Center, Paradise Yacht Management, Local Mocean Charters, Offshore Marine, Adventure Scuba and School, Stormy Pirates, Ocean Surfari, UVI CELL, VI Eco Tours, UVI Marine Sciences, Northside Charters and the Captain's School. Tax-deductible donations can be made [here]; applications for the 2027 program open in early March.



Background (L to R): Kaj Baron, Destiny Frett, Ana Fuertes, Gabby Boodram, Kel Issac, Kyron Tyrell-Riley, Olivia Smith, Michelle Laplace, Nichel Daniel. **Foreground** (L to R): Daniel Robles, Khymoi Weeks

Media Contact: Kennon Jones, director@vipca.org