

Taking charge

Young women learn about opportunities at roundtable

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ST. THOMAS — A few dozen of the Virgin Island's best and brightest young women attended the Young Women's Leadership Roundtable at the St. Thomas University of the Virgin Islands on Saturday.

The group spent the morning listening to both local and visiting speakers on the theme "useful tools for the future," which included topics of health, financial planning, professionalism, career development, business and technology, education, and social issues. In the afternoon, the women were split into small groups and discussed the topics. They were charged with the task of brainstorming recommendations and ideas for the issues raised by the speakers.

The conference was brought to the Virgin Islands by Just In Time, Inc., a non-profit company based in the Washington D.C. area that provides educational, career development training and counseling and community outreach services to youth and young adults. The organization has brought this roundtable conference to other areas of the Caribbean, South America, and the U.S.

The conference's participants had to write a 500-word essay, and have a 3.0 grade point average to attend. Most were college students, but there was one high school student and several other guests who participated.

Delegate to Congress Donna Christensen spoke to the group first, and emphasized the importance of health and spirituality to lead productive lives.

UVI accounting professor Sharon Simmons spoke of the importance of financial literacy, investment and planning. She said the three keys to financial success are to always spend less than you earn, avoid splurging, and invest the rest. Simmons also urged the women to create financial goals, develop a timeline and a plan to reach those goals. She advocated homeownership to build wealth, and saving 10 to 15 percent of after tax income.

Simmons gave the participants several Web site addresses to help them invest, achieve financial goals, and manage debt.

"I'm just sharing information with you like people have shared information with me," Simmons said.

Another UVI professor, Adelle Belle-Berry, spoke about self-esteem and self-image. She teaches social work and her focus is on children, youth and family.

"Self esteem determines the extent you are able to handle the challenges of life," she said.

Cecilia LaVern Webb, from Albuquerque, New Mexico, spoke to the group about the importance of an education, particularly higher education and post graduate studies.

"Education is knowledge, and knowledge is power," Webb explained. She urged the young women to always strive to get the best grades in school, because those grades follow you through your professional career.

"Doesn't it make sense to have the highest GPA so that you will stand out among everyone else who might be applying for the same job?" she asked.

Tonja McCoy, also from the U.S., started an organization called Millennium Entrepreneurs, which works with children from third to 12th grade who are interested in starting their own businesses. Because the technology fields are still male dominated, McCoy said companies are always looking to hire women and minorities.

"With technology skills, business savvy and knowledge of a foreign language, you will be at the top of the pile," she said.

Laverne Parks, from the Washington D. C. area, told the crowd that they have to invest in themselves. She suggested investing in a black "interview" suit and a professional resume. Parks said it is important to live your life right, because your business is sometimes your employer's business, too. She shared that when she worked for the federal government, she had to have top



secret clearance, and the FBI talked to everyone she ever knew. She urged the students to be careful what they do and who they associate with.

Parks also encouraged the women to keep an open mind and a positive attitude on the job.

"Never say, that's not in my job description, because that's how you grow and gain more job experience," she said.

The final presenter was Gloria Callwood, a UVI nursing professor who spoke about health care disparities, particularly in the VI.

She explained that African-Americans have a shorter life expectancies, different responses to medications, and different susceptibilities to diseases. Compared to white patients, many African-Americans often do not receive the same quality health care, and are more likely to be uninsured.

"Women are disproportionately affected by not having health insurance," she said.

She said it is vital that young people educate themselves and their families about health care issues, learn family medical histories, be physically active, have healthy eating habits, receive regular checkups and immunizations, and talk to health care providers about concerns.

While the conference organizers were slightly disappointed that the turnout wasn't larger — their goal had been 50 attendees — the university has asked them back next year, and they hope to have more participation then.