

Good morning community leaders and to all Virgin Islanders tuning in. My name is Chantel Hoheb and I'm happy to be the Executive Director of Operations and Development at the Virgin Islands Children's Museum here in St. Thomas. I joined the team in August 2020, during the COVID-19 shutdown. Today, I will tell you a little about our museum and our programs, and give more details about the programs towards the end of my testimony. If you have access to the internet, you can visit our website at [www.vichildrensmuseum.org](http://www.vichildrensmuseum.org) for information.

Before I begin, I would like to thank my co-Director, Amber McCammon for her amazing work at the museum. We would not be open right now if it wasn't for her, and our amazing staff. I'd like to recognize Zenaida Rogers, our Staff Manager and our Museum Floor and Front Desk Associates, Tashema Walwyn, Amoi Smith, Marianellie Colon, Shirmoy O'Garro and Ashunte Alexander. The museum could not be open and operating without our dedicated staff who welcomes all our visiting learners and keeps the museum clean and safe. And thank you as well to volunteers and amazing donors who believe in our mission. We literally voted in new board officers yesterday who I look forward to working with, but I wanted to send a special thank you to Alexander David, our Board President, and resident Tech Guy, who always lends a hand or just encouragement when needed.

The Virgin Islands Children's Museum (affectionately known as the VICM) is a non-profit organization located on the island of St. Thomas, which provides a space for untraditional learning and multiple free programs to children and families living on all islands within the territory. It is the mission of the VICM to bring children and families together in an interactive educational space where dynamic play inspires a love of learning. The VI Children's Museum was founded in 2015 by Sarah Hughes and Sarah Erickson with the help of many dedicated friends and volunteers and not without the non-sayers and push back from the community; a community that had never heard of a children's museum or understood their benefits on youth development, unless they had experienced one on the mainland. The museum opened its doors in 2016 in the Grand Galleria building located in downtown Charlotte Amalie. We serve a multicultural and multinational community of VI families and educators as well as welcome visitors from around the world. A year after opening, the museum was flooded and most of the exhibits were destroyed after losing the roof to Hurricanes Irma & Maria. As parents were struggling with no power, schools were still damaged and life was at a standstill, The Sarahs and their team got to work to create an interim location in Buccaneer Mall (the museum's 2<sup>nd</sup> location build out) to provide a space for families to learn through play, while traditional learning was still recovering from the storms, which caused further educational setbacks among students. All of this without government support or any disaster funding to help with the loss of the entire museum. At the end of 2017, the VI Children's Museum became the USVI Affiliate for Dolly Parton's Imagination Library Program, thanks to the help of Sarah Brin and the Community Foundation of the Virgin Islands, a program that the VICM administers to this day, regardless of whether or not we have funding to support it.

The VICM is a member of the Association of Children's Museums, the Museums Association of the Caribbean and an allied member of the USVI Hotel & Tourism Association. We are the first children's museum in the territory and currently the only one with a physical location. We are still considered a small/emerging museum and we have endured through multiple closures and restructuring due to multiple natural disasters; two category 5 hurricanes & pandemic. In 2019, we moved into our current home in Buccaneer Mall, the museum's 3<sup>rd</sup> build out in 3 years. That year we received funding from Princess Cruises Community Foundation to run our FREE Field Trip Program, a very successful program that even covered the transportation costs for visiting school groups to the museum. The museum closed in April of 2020 due to the COVID-19 shutdown and reopened in October. We managed to retain all our employees through this shut down and were fortunate enough to not experience any COVID scares that would have caused us to halt operations.

The museum exhibit space consists of over 3,000 square feet, currently showcasing STREAM based interactive hands-on exhibits as well as rotating pop-up exhibits, demonstrations and community events. STREAM stands for *science, technology, reading, engineering, arts and humanities, and mathematics*. Exhibits that highlight and celebrate Caribbean culture, people, places and local natural resources are the cornerstone of our exhibit curation. We are open 6 days a week, Tuesday to Sunday. Our operating hours are 10AM-5PM, with the last visitor permitted 30 minutes before closing. On Sundays, we open 11AM-4PM. Our newest exhibit is the Mango Farm to Market, sponsored by Alpine Securities, which was completed and opened in July 2021. That exhibit cost over \$200,000 to build and install. Our visiting learners don't care about how much it costs or how many times we have to replace exhibit parts, they focus on picking mangoes, planting them, and selling them in the Mango Market! The Mango Farm is one of our exhibits that highlights almost all of our STREAM based concepts and even parents enjoy it! Some of our other exhibits include a Taino bohio, our super popular water table, RigMaJig, Light Room, and of course our in-door playground.

Our organization runs multiple outreach and on-site programs that reach underserved families with children. The VICM administers and has administered programs such as Toddler Tuesday, Dolly Parton's Imagination Library, Museums for All, Blue Star Museums, our At-Home Discovery Kits, and the extremely successful Teen Time Program. I will get back to the program details later in this testimony. We are currently looking for support to launch our Robotics & Engineering Program, starting with a monthly workshop for children 8-13 years of age.

The VICM constantly get requests to participate in community events and we're happy to have attended the Afternoon on the Green, The Slider Showdown, USVI Festival events in 2023, Tutu Park Mall's Back to School and Holiday Giving events, as well as the Harvest Festival and UVI's Energy Fair free of charge. The VI Children's Museum hosts and facilitates in-house community events such as Youth Art Month, Storytime with Grandma, Santa's Gift Giveaway and more recently our 1<sup>st</sup> FREE Community Day of Play since COVID. We've also worked with Reichhold Center to host an In Deh Yard Cultural pop-up where the RCA team provided traditional VI games for our visitors to learn and experience. We have also held Bamboula and Storytelling Workshops. The VICM is always happy to host some of our librarians for a Storytime when the library is closed or unavailable for use. Our well curated collection of books in our Book Nook is a great place for young readers to find something that interests them in a cool, comfortable setting.

Historically, the VICM has mainly survived on corporate contributions, grants and donations from amazing members of our community. This is the first year the VICM has been included in the Government's Budget and invited to speak to this body of leaders, for which we are very grateful. We are currently rebuilding our Board and looking for more volunteers to whom our mission is important and who share our enthusiasm for learning through play and early-childhood development. Part of our plan moving forward is to diversify our funding; with an extremely small team, our focus has been running the museum and our programs and sometimes we fall behind in seeking the funding we need. I'm happy to say we've finally found a grant writer, who we're currently getting up to speed on what the VICM is all about.

Each Senator should have received our one-pager featuring QR codes that takes you to information on our programs, visitor numbers, exhibits and more. Most recently, I'm happy to announce that from January to October 2023, we have already surpassed our previous year's visitor numbers which were our highest yet. So far this year, we have welcomed 11,494 people to the museum, from school groups and summer camps, to member families that visit after school or on the weekends, as well as travelers who plan months in advance to visit the museum during their stay on St. Thomas or St. John.

The VI Children's Museum is in constant need of financial support, meaning if you see us receive a grant or big donation, know we still need more to run our program. In 2022, our operating budget was over \$500,000; the majority of our funding going to rent, utilities, staffing, insurance and other operational expenses. Although our programming costs money, it's important to remember that our physical museum and our interactive exhibits are our main program and must be supported so we can remain to act as a resource for our community.

Now, I'd like to tell you all a little more about some of our programs.

**Toddler Tuesday** takes place every Tuesday from 10:30-11:15am at the VI Children's Museum. Early learners & caregivers explore age-appropriate STREAM based learning concepts via arts & crafts, fine motor skills development activities, movement & music exploration, science experiments, sensory play, and more! Regular admission applies.

Regular Museum admission is \$10 per person for everyone 2 years old and up. We also have Memberships for different family sizes; our 4-person family membership is just \$185 for the year. We offer a 10% discount for senior citizens, veterans and military personnel.

**Dolly Parton's Imagination Library** is an early-childhood book gifting program that mails free, high-quality books to children from birth until they begin school at age 5, no matter their family's income. Families receive a free book monthly to read to their little ones, creating social bonds and laying a great foundation for their child's development.

You can sign up for this program on our website and in the museum. It's important to remember that while these books are FREE to recipients, they are not Free. The VI Children's Museum covers the cost of this program, even when we don't have any financial backing for it. Early childhood literacy is that important to us. When you sign up, if you are able, you can choose to pay for the program, which is less than \$30 for 1 year per child. This will help the museum cover the cost for families who have the greatest need.

Since the inception of the program in 2017, 1,003 children have graduated out of the program. The number change monthly as children register and graduate, however in September 2023, we had 918 children registered in the USVI; 570 in St. Croix (203 females, 250 males, 117 unanswered), 28 in St. John (14 females, 9 males, and 5 unanswered), and 320 in St. Thomas (107 female, 146 male, 67 unanswered).

The VICM is happy to administer the **Museums for All** (MFA) program, a signature access program of the Association of Children's Museums (ACM) and the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) to encourage families of all backgrounds and economic status to visit museums regularly and build lifelong museum habits.

The program enables families who receive food stamps to visit the Virgin Islands Children's Museum for a reduced admission fee of \$2.00 per person with the presentation of a valid SNAP Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) card. With 1 card, 4 people can receive reduced admission to the museum. The MFA is part of the Virgin Islands Children's Museum's broad commitment to include and welcome all. We are happy to announce that we finally have support for this program again, from VINGN who is currently sponsoring the MFA program, which will not only help us cover the short fall from that reduced admission but help us put marketing dollars behind the program and get the message out to more low-income families that we are here for them to Explore, Play and Discover together.

- Museums helps people learn in new and exciting ways.

- Museums are safe places for families to bond, learn, and explore! They help build strong individuals, families, and communities.
- Studies have shown that children who visit museums are better prepared for school and life.

The Virgin Islands Children’s Museum is a **Blue Star Museum**. The [Blue Star Museum](#) program offers free admission to active-duty military personnel and their families each summer from Armed Forces Day in May through Labor Day in September. This FREE admission program is available for those currently serving in the United States Military—Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, Coast Guard as well as members of the Reserves, National Guard, U.S. Public Health Commissioned Corps and NOAA Commissioned Corps—plus up to five of their family members.

Our **At-Home Discovery Kit** program was created in 2020 during the COVID shut down. When the community couldn’t come to the museum, the museum decided to go to them. Kits were curated with themes such as water quality testing, earth science and measuring your mental health. Kits include science and art activities to help keep children engaged at home. The quality of the kits and how many we can distribute are dependent on the financial support we get for the kits or donated items from other community organizations. Our largest distribution took place in 2021, when we partnered with the [MCH Division at the VI Department of Health](#) under the Project Launch Program, whose goal is to support a deeper attention to children’s mental health and emotional well-being. We were able to distribute 2,000 kits to children throughout the territory with the help of community organization such as the Boys & Girls Clubs of St. Thomas/St. John Inc., Catholic Charities of the Virgin Islands St. Thomas/St. John/St. Croix, Department of Health MCH Clinics, Head Start and Human Services St. Thomas/St. Croix, and the Salvation Army. Those kits included a calendar with a fun engaging design that instructed children and families on how to measure and communicate about their mental health. Some seeds and dirt (from the Department of Agriculture) were also included in the kit. Families were encouraged to grow their own food bearing plants and therefore could both measure their mental health and the actual growth of their plant.

We have since created connections with other organizations who work with children to widen our reach for our Discovery Kits; now all we need is funding to produce more kits.

**Youth Art Month** (YAM) is celebrated nationally in March, and the [USVI](#) has celebrated for the last 15 years. The VI Children’s Museum is proud to be the host of this art appreciation program on St. Thomas for the last 3 years. Youth Art Month is a celebration of the visual arts. It encourages support for quality school art programs and promotes art material safety. The Council for Art Education (CFAE) administers the program at the national level. The program provides a medium for recognizing skills developed through visual arts experiences unlike any other curriculum subjects, including:

- \*Problem solving
- \*Creativity
- \*Observation
- \*Communication

Support for Youth Art Month USVI is growing and with it we hope to grow the support for our art educators. Currently there are too many school without art teachers or art programs. And when they do have art teachers, they usually have a hard time acquiring quality supplies for their classes and

mostly have to purchase supplies themselves, which as we all know, is another impossible task on their salary.

This year we hosted a phenomenal student art exhibition at the VI Children's Museum with art pieces from over 400 students on St. Thomas and St. John. This was our 3<sup>rd</sup> year hosting the exhibit and welcoming students for FREE art tours thanks to support of our YAM sponsors. I found out during opening night of the exhibit that my own little cousins who attend Bowsky Elementary don't have an art teacher and therefore didn't submit any work to be included in the exhibition. The disappointment on their little faces when they came to the opening hit me hard. We HAVE to do better. If our administrations won't support our teachers, the VICM is happy to assist, however we still need the support of the community and our leaders to do so. I worked for the Department of Tourism for 7.5 years and one of the main things I learned is, if someone sees that you can accomplish a project without resources, you are more than likely NEVER to receive assistance for those projects, unless it becomes popular to do so. So what happens? Things never get done and then the community complains about not having things to do for our children. It's a ridiculous cycle that can be easily broken with some consideration and communication. We HAVE to do better for our children. We can't want to support artists, athletes or academics after they've made it big. It is our jobs as community leaders to provide the tools and resources for all VI children to set them on the path to do great things. Isn't that the village we all speak about? Where is our village now?

The VICM's **Teen Time** program was a collaborative effort between educators from the University of the Virgin Islands and life coaches from Elevate Wi. What was supposed to be a summer program, ended up taking place from October 2022 to March 2023 due to issues with the administration of the grant. Teen Time took place on select Fridays during the month, from 5:30-7:30pm at the museum. It was only for children 12 and up, no smaller children were invited because we needed to provide this time and space specifically for teens to focus on their development. As you know, many teens don't look at themselves as children so our name can put them off sometimes. During our Teen Time game nights, students would walk to the museum, or arrive with their parents, teachers or group leaders to enjoy food and drinks before they got into undirected play. Students could participate in self-exploration through fun and interactive games lead by Elevate Wi. They could also learn strategy games such as mancala and dominoes in addition to receiving math tutoring from Dr. Adam Parr and peer-educators from UVI. Students could also choose to just relax and socialize in our Taino Bohio. We welcomed over 700 people to our Game Nights and to watch the change in many of these students, still gives me goosebumps. They could barely look at much less talk to other teens when we first started. Watching the friends that were created during our game nights, still makes me emotional I often think about what those teens are doing now and if they have any positive programs to participate in. The game nights started off a little slow, then teens started telling their friends and classmates about it. We even got the schools and the Department of Education to share our flyers and encourage more students to participate in this FREE program. We would see new students and parents each game night. Some of our teens were on the spectrum and still benefitted from our game night environment. They were embraced by all the other teens, where as other times and in some school environments, those students may be separated from or ignored by peers their own age.

I want to thank this body, especially Senator Bolques and his staff, for the invitation to share with you some of what the Virgin Islands Children's Museum has done and continue do in our community. Today, you will also hear from the Children's Museum of St. Croix. They are a great organization, separate from ours, (I have to say that because even the press mixes us up sometimes) that currently operate a mobile museum. During their testimony, you will hear more about the importance of Play to the development of children, especially during early childhood. Our team at the VICM fully support this organization as we believe every island should have a children's museum to serve the youth of the Virgin Islands. Just as every child is different however, each non-profit organization is different

and all have very different needs. I therefore challenge this body to assess, visit and ask the right questions of non-profits in our community so you can provide the best assistance to that organization who is helping to fulfill a need in the community that government agencies may not be able to provide. It is important that you understand that while children's museum share that title, all of them are different. Children's museum should cater to their particular community and as we know, St. Thomians, Crucians and St. Johnians are all different, in the best ways possible. So while the VICM may have a STREAM based museum, a children's museum in St. John may develop a more environmentally focused program or one that highlights the marine industry, just to give an example.

Thank you again for your time and attention. I now welcome your questions about the VICM and our programming. Anything I may not be able to answer, I may ask for help from my co-director Amber in St. Thomas, or I will find out the answer and come back to you all.