

Business Monday

Fire, hurricanes can't stop brewers

By **ANDREA MILAM**
Special to the Daily News

They rose from the ashes. They weathered the storm. And now, more than three years after a fire devastated the Tap Room and nine months after the hurricanes brought the rebuild to a halt, St. John Brewers is ready to reopen their expanded bar, restaurant, and brewery at Mongoose Junction in Cruz Bay.

St. John Brewers was founded in 2004 by Kevin Chipman and Chirag Vyas, whose Tropical Mango Pale Ale was a big hit with visitors and residents alike.

In 2006, the duo opened the Tap Room at Mongoose Junction, where patrons could come sample their ever-expanding offerings, paired with bar food and good conversation.

By 2015, the Tap Room had become a well-established venue and the St. John Brewers line had expanded to include Island Summer Ale and Island Hoppin' IPA beers, and root beer, ginger beer and a Green Flash energy drink.

Then, on Jan. 23, 2015, a fire began at Mongoose Junction and St. John Brewers operations manager Tim Hanley watched as the culmination of years of hard work and dedication

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St. John Brewers owner Kevin Chipman shows off the Tap Room's new five-barrel brewing system.



Daily News photo by LORI ABBOTTS

Rashidi Clenance boasts a large collection of memorabilia from local athletes.

Why I love my job

Rashidi Clenance is all sports, all the time

Want to talk sports? Rashidi Clenance is your man. Owner of the Win Mill 2.0 sports bar in Frenchtown, St. Thomas, Clenance is passionate about Virgin Islands sports history.

As a former sports reporter and sports talk show host on local radio and TV, he was able to assemble a large sports memorabilia collection dedicated to Virgin Islands athletes.

He has amassed hundreds of autographed photos, baseballs, bats, game jerseys, all from Virgin Islands professionals and college players such as his buddy, basketball legend Tim Duncan, who grew up with Clenance on St. Croix, and boxing great Julian Jackson. Items in the collection date back as far back as an 1895 newspa-

per article about Peter Jackson, the first black heavyweight champion, to the present, with boots and hat from jockey Julio Felix, who just won his 3,000th race.

When a collection gets that large, where do you put it so you can share it with the world? You open a sports bar, of course.

"The interest isn't what it should be for V.I. history, let alone V.I. sports," said Clenance. "As the curator of this collection, I feel it's very important that young people can come in and see that so many Virgin Islanders made it to the elite level or were exceptional college or international athletes and are now successful in business."

— Lori Abbotts

CFVI receives \$25,000 donation from Assured Guaranty

Daily News Staff

The Community Foundation of the Virgin Islands has received a \$25,000 donation from Assured Guaranty to further the foundation's recovery work in the territory.

"Since Hurricanes Irma and Maria

made landfall in 2017, Assured Guaranty has closely monitored the progress of recovery," said Assured Guaranty CEO and President Dominic Frederico in presenting the donation. "The positive work, integrity and commitment that the people and the government of the U.S. Virgin Islands have been

showing during the rebuilding process is encouraging for the long-term future of the islands."

Frederico said his company has been impressed with the relief work performed by the Community Foundation "to help your fellow citizens recover and thrive."



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ReVive USVI competition announces first winners

MIAMI — The University of Miami and the Prior Family Foundation have announced the conclusion of the ReVive USVI Economic Impact Competition.

Participants from all over the United States submitted ideas focused on helping the Virgin Islands recover from the devastation of the 2017 Caribbean hurricane season.

In the fall, The Launch Pad at the University of Miami and the Prior Family Foundation partnered to leverage the business and academic communities to spur the economic recovery of the region through innovation. This partnership resulted in the launch of the ReVive USVI Economic Impact Competition.

The foundation donated \$20,000 in prizes, awarded to the most innovative and potentially impactful ideas that would help invigorate the VI. economy.

To be eligible for the prizes, applicants needed to provide a concept paper outlining their plans, a video pitch and a business plan detailing how the concept would impact economic development and create jobs.

According to Brian Breslin, director of The Launch Pad, "The ReVive competition was a great opportunity for students and the public to express their creative energies for a great cause. We're looking forward to seeing what great results come from this

unique initiative."

The winning entries ranged from affordable housing solutions to eco-friendly tourism initiatives. The winner received \$10,000 for an innovative food and beverage concept planned for St. John.

First Place: Leatherback Brewing Company

Building one of the first micro-breweries in the Caribbean, Leatherback is bringing a uniquely local flavor to beer in the U.S. Virgin Islands. Employing locals, and sourcing as many local ingredients as possible, Leatherback is poised to help grow the local economy.

Second Place: Virgin Islands Trail Alliance

Focusing on the number one economic driver, tourism, the VI Trail Alliance is working to rebuild the natural features of the U.S. Virgin Islands one hiking trail at a time. VITAL is expanding access to walking trails across the islands and making new areas of the islands accessible to tourism.

Third Place: VI-Home

An innovative approach to affordable and storm resistant housing for disaster response. Using shipping containers that can be pre-built and shipped, VI-Home offers a solution to help re-house those displaced by storms.

BREW

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went up in flames.

Vyas, who was traveling home from the states that day, received word of the fire just before boarding a plane in Miami, and spent the next few hours on the flight imagining the worst. Chipman was on St. Thomas, and made the long barge ride back to St. John, unsure of the sight that would meet him when he arrived at Mongoose Junction.

The fire claimed most of the Tap Room's space that day. The kitchen survived, as did the St. John Brewers office. Three days after the fire, St. John Brewers hosted a gathering in the Mongoose parking lot, and seven weeks after the fire, they opened a smaller, temporary Tap Room in their former office space.

"We were too committed to St. John Brewers and to the island," said Chipman. "We weren't going to use this as a way to say, 'You know, we had a good run, but we'll wrap this up now.' We felt like we still had a lot to offer, and there was never a question as to whether we would rebuild."

In true Love City fashion, island restaurants and bars hired the Tap Room's staff, allowing them to stay employed until the new temporary Tap Room reopened.

During the next two and a half years, Chirag and Vyas worked with architect Glen Speer, who owns the portion of Mongoose Junction where the Tap Room is located, to design a rebuild while continuing to operate the bar and restaurant in its smaller, temporary location.

They made plans for the brew pub to occupy their former space as well as an adjacent space across the breezeway, greatly expanding their



Photo by ANDREA MILAM

St. John Brewers Operations Manager Tim Hanley, and owners Kevin Chipman and Chirag Vyas with their new brewing setup at the Tap Room.

square footage. They also incorporated a five-barrel brewing system on the bar and restaurant's second floor, giving the company the ability to create a wide variety of beer styles.

The new Tap Room was slated to open in late 2017, and then Hurricane Irma made a direct hit on the island.

The restaurant only suffered minimal water damage, but Vyas and Chipman's homes were destroyed, and the rebuild came to a halt as the business owners picked up the pieces of their personal lives. St. John Brewers hosted weekly happy hours where they served free beer, allowing residents to come together, take their minds off the devastation, and simply enjoy a cold beer at the end of a long day.

Once power was restored to Mongoose Junction at the end of October, the rebuild of the Tap Room began again in earnest, and the newly expanded bar, restaurant and brew pub has celebrated a soft opening.

The brewing operation, designed by master brewer Alan Pugsley,

is visible to patrons at the bar below, and St. John Brewers beers are served on draft or canned in 32-ounce crowlers that customers can take to the beach.

Air-conditioned indoor seating is available at tables built by St. Thomas non-profit organization My Brother's Workshop, along with outdoor patio seating and plenty of free parking.

The Tap Room menu's entree offerings will be expanded, and a stone pizza oven will allow for a variety of pizzas to be served.

The new, larger space will lend itself to live entertainment and events, and there's ample seating at the bar, handcrafted locally using portions of the old Tap Room bar that was in place during the fire.

"We've been brewing here for 15 years but it hasn't always been visible to the public, so I think people will realize just what we do and how much work goes into producing the beer," said Hanley. "Everybody will be pretty in awe of the brewery upstairs."

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