



Love City Livin'



Daily News photo by ANDREA MILAM

Keziah Liburd, center, works with the Youth Conservation Corps clearing brush around the old Francis Bay building.

Summer crews spruce up trails, beaches, ruins

By ANDREA MILAM
St. John Correspondent

If you've spent any amount of time in the Virgin Islands National Park this summer, you likely came across one of the two work crews that's been clearing trails, cleaning up trash on the beaches, and fixing up ruins and other park facilities.

The park's Youth Conservation Corps and the Friends of the Virgin Islands National Park summer work crew spent six weeks and four weeks, respectively, on their efforts to improve the park. Each

crew is made up of local teens, and for many of those on the work crews, the summer experience represents their first paying job.

"The YCC first started with the mission of providing a job for young people and it's also meant to provide skills and show them different opportunities in the conservation field," said St. John YCC program coordinator Alanna Smith.

The YCC's job list was extensive this year, and it included cleaning up the old Francis Bay building, installing signs that were lost in Hurricane Irma, trimming

vegetation and improving water flow on hiking trails, and restriping parking lots and painting park facilities.

"Toward the end of the program, we'll work with them on their resumes and help them take the next steps if they're interested in careers in conservation," said Smith. "We want to help set them up for their future career goals, while at the same time, the work they do helps to improve the park. It's not a one-way street; it's a win-win situation."

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Kessler reflects on Friends presidency as retirement nears

By ANDREA MILAM
St. John Correspondent

The Virgin Islands National Park has seen many changes over the last two decades.

It's now essentially an anchorless park, thanks to the installation of mooring balls at several of its most popular St. John bays.

The park has become increasingly accessible to local students, welcoming about 3,000 schoolchildren each year, and it is home to several events each year, some of which, like the Beach to Beach Power Swim, have garnered international attention.

All of these initiatives have been driven by the Friends of the Virgin Islands National Park under the guidance of president Joe Kessler, who will retire at the end of 2018.

Kessler first arrived on St. John in 1973 for a long weekend sojourn from Peace Corps training in Puerto Rico. After a five-year Peace Corps stint, Kessler went on to work with the international humanitarian agency Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere. He and his wife, Cristina, continued to visit St. John, spending time with their friend John Garrison, who went from running a term dive charter business to heading up the Friends of the VINP.

"In December 2000 I was



Joe Kessler

working in Mali, West Africa, and John and his wife came to visit us," Kessler recalled. "One morning we were going down the river on a trip to Timbuktu

and John says, 'You always said you wanted my job when I was ready to give it up. Were you serious?'"

At that point, Kessler had been working with CARE for nearly 20 years, and he and his wife decided to make the move to St. John, where he accepted his new role as Friends president in July 2001.

Kessler touts the move toward an anchorless park as one of the Friends' biggest accomplishments under his tenure, adding that funding for the park's archaeology program has grown tenfold during his time as president.

"It's now one of the signature archaeology programs in the Caribbean," Kessler said. "There's a lot of great work that's been done by VINP archaeologist Ken Wild and his staff, and it's the funding that's made all of that possible."

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Love City happenings

Animal Care Center potluck Saturday

Residents and their well-behaved, leashed dogs are invited to celebrate the dog days of summer with a potluck at the Animal Care Center on Saturday from 5 to 8 p.m. Please bring a dish to share. There will be a cash bar on site.

The event will aim to raise money for the island's only animal shelter, as well as bring awareness of the ACC and its mission to residents and visitors alike.

Love City Pan Dragons to resume practice Aug. 17

The Love City Pan Dragons will begin practice for the 2018-19 season on Aug. 17 at 3:30 p.m. at the pan yard in Cruz Bay. Anyone interested in joining can pick up a registration form ahead of time from the Sports, Parks and Recreation Department building, and you're welcome to come and watch the first practice to see if the band might be a good fit for you.

Ages 8 and up are welcome, and no previous experience is necessary. For more information, email pandragons@unitedstates.vi.

Fun day, school supply giveaway Aug. 25

Two hundred backpacks and school supplies will be distributed to St. John children on Aug. 25 from 2 to 5 p.m. at the Frank Powell Park in Cruz Bay. Sponsored by the Dynamic Dancers, St. John Community Foundation, Rotary Club of St. John, and the St. John Youth Organization, all St. John children and families are welcome to enjoy free burgers and hot dogs. There will also be a cotton candy machine, bouncy house, face painting, and other fun kid-friendly activities.

Carolina Corral fun day Oct. 13

The Carolina Corral will host a free back-to-school fun day on Oct. 13 from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. with a variety of games including balloon toss, egg and spoon, chicken races, and a donkey obstacle course. There will be crafting activities and a contest to see who can take the best selfie with a Carolina Corral resident, along with food, drinks, and pony or donkey rides. Free transportation will be provided between Cruz Bay and Coral Bay.

New Tax Assessor hours

Cashier services at the St. John Office of the Tax Assessor, located at the Islandia building, will be open Tuesdays and Thursdays from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m.

St. John Passport Office

Residents can apply for passports in person at the St. John Passport Acceptance Facility at the Islandia building on Thursdays from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. Only photos taken at Connections are currently being accepted at this location.

Send us your news and ideas

Do you have something to share? Send us your news, tips, photos or story ideas for Love City Livin' to notices@dailynews.vi.



Lights, cameras ... dance

The Dynamic Dancers perform in the Frank Powell Park in Cruz Bay for a film crew with the Matt Landau television show, "A Sense of Place," which explores the emerging world of vacation rentals. The crew is filming on St. John for the rest of the week.

Daily News photos by ANDREA MILAM



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The Friends organization has supported natural resource projects in the park, including maintaining hiking trails and monitoring sea turtle activity on and around the island. Cultural resource sites have been opened to visitors and studied via a collaborative relationship with students from Denmark, who research the island's history in the Danish archives before coming to St. John to collaborate what they've learned.

The Friends has supported the restoration and preservation of historic sites, and they run a docent program at the Anna-berg ruins, where they also host the popular annual Folk Life Festival.

Engaging local children in the park is an effort that Kessler said has grown exponentially during his tenure. From funding transportation for field trips, to leading kids on hikes, seashore walks, and archaeology visits, the Friends' efforts to help school children gain an interest in the park resulted in one of Kessler's most heartwarming moments as the organization's president.

"There was a pen pal program between children at Guy Benjamin School and a village in southern Africa, and I had the opportunity to read some of the letters the Guy Benjamin kids had written," Kessler said. "They had recently been on a field trip in the park, and every single kid was writing so effusively about this great park on their island and all the cool things they can do there. Looking back on it still gives me goosebumps. To give the island's children a greater sense of nature and conservation and what that means for the future is one of the most important things that we do."

The devastation that Irma brought to St. John temporarily changed the focus of the Friends, which brought in teams of professional sawyers to clear the park's hiking trails of downed trees, followed by crews that focused on repairing the trails' tread, steps, and stone walls,

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— Friends of the Virgin Islands National Park President Joe Kessler

and mitigating drainage issues. The storm didn't contribute to Kessler's decision to retire, he said.

"I knew the time was coming, but I didn't quite know when," said Kessler. "When I look at the Friends now, I see them in the best shape they've ever been in. Fundraising is going well, and I have a great staff. It seemed like a good time."

Kessler and his wife are hoping to travel back to Africa for some volunteer opportunities, and to tour other National Parks and visit family in the states as well. They're unsure whether they will sell their St. John home.

"It will be very difficult for me to leave," Kessler said. "I really love so much about St. John. Seventeen-plus years later, and the natural beauty still blows me away every day."



Daily News photo by ANDREA MILAM

Friends of the Virgin Islands National Park trails coordinator Mark Gestwicki, left, with the Friends of the VINP summer work crew Sadiyah Claxton, Kyle Fenton, Ameir Sprauve, Davenee James, Patrick Hendrickson, Jamal Brown, Joshua Whisler, Ahijah Fielteau, and Aaliyah Hodge.

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The Friends of the Park's four-week program, which ran in tandem with the YCC and even teamed up with that crew at times, wrapped up on Friday. The eight-person crew, half from St. John and half from St. Thomas, took on similar tasks including removing trash from beaches and readying trails for heavy rains from potential storms by improving drainage.

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“We did recreation days on Fridays, so at the end of each week we got to do something fun in the park like kayaking or snorkeling. They get to have fun in the park that's in their own back yard.”

— Friends of the Virgin Islands National Park trails coordinator Mark Gestwicki

something fun in the park like kayaking or snorkeling," said Friends trails coordinator Mark Gestwicki. "They get to have fun in the park that's in their own back yard."

While some of the crew members cited those fun days as their favorite part of the summer work experience, others expressed a deeper interest in subjects like marine biology.

"I want to be a marine biologist, so going out on the boat and seeing sea turtles and learning about how they're endangered was my favorite part of the experience," said YCC crew member Kahlifah Powell.

YCC crew member Keziah Liburd

said she most enjoyed a marine outing with the park's law enforcement division, when the crew learned how to pull others up onto the boat and how to survive when lost at sea, while Friends crew member Patrick Hendrickson, a basketball player who returned for a third year with the crew this year, said he liked that he could stay in shape while doing physical work within the park.

"I just wanted to help make the trails neat for everyone," said Aaliyah Hodge of St. Thomas, who just completed her second year with the Friends crew. "You get to see different animals and trees, and we learn something new every day."

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