

The Virgin Islands Consortium

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My Brother's Workshop Comes to St. Croix



Basketball-styled picnic table constructed by My Brother's Workshop, St. Thomas

With eight successful years of changing the lives of young people on St. Thomas already under its belt, My Brother's Workshop, a non-profit vocational training and counseling program for at-risk

youth ages 16 to 24, will open shop on St. Croix in June.

The program exists to help the territory's youth who have lost their way get back on track by offering them hope through mentoring, counseling, paid job training, education, and job placement services.

"It came from the need of seeing too many kids dying, not having any direction, dropping out of school, just basically with no direction," explained Scott Bradley, founder.

And Bradley's program is far-reaching.

"We work with kids of all different backgrounds, but they are basically kids who have either dropped out of school or struggling, kids who may be court-involved, criminal justice, things of that nature," he explained, adding that youth with learning disabilities are also welcomed.

"We cater to anyone who may need extra help," Bradley said.

But what makes My Brother's Workshop unique is that it is accredited to teach participants trades in construction, carpentry, electrical, plumbing and masonry. Furthermore, participants receive a national certificate after

completing training and are provided employment placement assistance. Not to mention, the program serves as a place for participants to gain necessary life skills in a safe environment.

L to R: Former Human Services Commissioner Christopher Finch and founder of My Brother's Workshop, Scott Bradley

"It's a never-ending social place that they can come, as well, as far as to get advice or direction or additional education," Bradley said. "Some of our kids actually end up going to college. We have two at UVI, one at the University of Minnesota, and a couple in the military."



He added, "You don't really leave us until we know that you're employed and we help you with that. The goal is to keep you from making bad choices [after leaving our program]."

Bradley, who spoke with *VI Consortium* on Friday following the second of several meetings being held in St. Croix to establish the program on the island, said his efforts have been well-received by members of the Senate and local community. He highlighted the support of Sens. Novelle Francis and Nereida "Nellie" O'Reilly, as well as that of former senator, Judi Buckley and a representative from Gov. Mapp's office.

"It's a really strong group and I think it's going to make it easy to get going," Bradley said.

Former Commissioner of Human Services Christopher Finch is chair of the steering committee working to bring My Brother's Workshop to St. Croix.

"This is really exciting because as I've watched over the years, I can't think of another program in the Virgin Islands that has had the success with troubled older teenagers, especially males, troubled young men, that My Brother's Workshop has had," Finch said.

He continued, "Their combination of teaching a skill that makes them employable and able to earn a good wage, along with the personal care and attention, and the counseling, their knowledge and their ability of how to reach people where they're at — take them from where they're at, to help heal what needs to be healed, help them to get into a better place and then leave the program with a skill that will help them get employed and secure for the rest of their lives, is really a tremendous model."

Bradley said his St. Thomas location is housed in a 12,000 sq. ft. woodworking cabinet facility at the Tutu Park Mall, and he will soon open a training cafe and bakery on the island. Anywhere from 50-100 participants receive direct services from the program each year, but Bradley said his team also provides indirect services to the community.

"We also do a lot of preventative programs, like little shop classes with elementary schools and different groups that request us," he said. "Plus, we do a lot of community outreach, like dealing with the kids on the corner."

While he says he hopes to reach those same numbers in St. Croix in time, he is content to begin with at least four persons.

"You have to start off slow and train everybody involved, and then as you go, the numbers will climb," Bradley explained.

As for funding for the program, Bradley says it comes in a variety of ways.

"We normally get partially funded through a government subsidy, we get partially funded through donations, and a key part of what we do is we actually have a social enterprise, where we can, in the training or in the construction, whether building furniture, we can actually sell that and subsidize the program with services we can provide. We work on projects that can ultimately be sold, which in turn gives money back to the program, but also gives money back to them, as well."

Samuel Carrion, senior pastor at Prophetic House of Worship in Peter's Rest and a member of the My Brother's Workshop steering committee, said it was important for him to be a part of the effort because of his passion for St. Croix's youth.

“Everyday, I realize more and more that early intervention is really the key to helping our young people,” he said. “So, that’s one of the things that got me really motivated. Anything that has to do with our youths, I want to be a part of it to be able to change their lives and to also help them to succeed.



Participants in My Brother’s Workshop, St. Thomas

Pastor Carrion went on to highlight the importance of youth mentorship.

“What we have is a lot of young people that don’t have mentors or parents, and really, what they’re doing is crying out for help,” he said. “So, having a program like My Brother’s Workshop that comes in and assists, and change people’s lives, is something that I’m really passionate for.”

While he is still working to secure a building on St. Croix and with a little over four months to go, Bradley says he looks forward to the launch.

“We’ve been wanting to come to St. Croix for a long time and St. Croix has always wanted us, so it’s really great that we can work it out,” he said.