

# Virtues Project begins training on STX

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ST. CROIX — Training for The Virtues Project began Monday at the Virgin Islands Cardiac Center and will continue throughout the week at the governor's office in Frederiksted.

The Virtues Project is a global initiative that has spread to 95 countries with the goal to inspire the practice and teach virtues. The initiative began 25 years ago, founded by three Americans living in Canada who wanted to find a way to stop young people from killing each other.

The founders, Linda Kavelin Popov, her husband Dr. Dan Popov, and her brother John Kavelin first surveyed youth between the ages of 14 and 24 and asked why they committed random acts of murder. The No. 1 reason was "boredom" and that was further defined as a "lack of meaning and purpose," according to Dara Feldman, certified facilitator of The Virtues Project, who is teaching the course this week.

Feldman said the trio then researched world cultures, oral traditions and various sacred text and determined that virtues were recognized worldwide. They published a Virtues Guide that was adopted in more than 20 countries in the first two months. The guide taught five strategies and listed 52 virtues practiced by adults and children. The revised version, The Family Virtues Guide, published in 1995, has become an inter-

national best seller translated into more than a dozen languages. In 1994, the International Year of the Family, the United Nations recognized The Virtues Project as a "model global program for families of all cultures." Presently, the program is taught in 97 countries, has been endorsed by the Dalai Lama and has been recognized formally by the country of Fiji, she said.

During the first day of the course on St. Croix, sponsored by the Community Foundation of the Virgin Islands in conjunction with the Governor's Children and Families Council, Feldman explained the basics of the program to a group of 40 teachers, parents, counselors, early childhood educators, a minister, representatives from the VI departments of Justice and Human Services and the social worker from the Youth Rehabilitation Center. At least 30 of the attendees will continue the training to become certified facilitators, according to Pam Benjamin of CFVI.

Feldman said five strategies are used to teach The Virtues Project, including the language of virtues learned to inspire rather than to discourage the listener.

"If you learn nothing else but to speak the language of virtues, the world is already a better place," she said.

Feldman said language can inspire or discourage the listener and words vibrate at different frequencies. To demonstrate the

power of language, she asked students to hold an arm up and feel the difference in resistance when another student tried to push it down, saying positive or negative terms.

She also talked about research on frozen water crystals that reflected the words on the labels of the container. When the water was in a "thank you" container, the crystal formed a delicate snowflake shape. When the water was exposed to negative words, it formed an unattractive lump.

"Bullying hurts everyone in the energy field," Feldman said, not just the child being picked on or the bully, but observers as well.

The basic method of teaching virtues, she said, is to incorporate descriptive language and praise others for practicing virtues, rather than a generic "good job." Language should not be judgmental but should reflect appreciation, acceptance and assertiveness.

A virtues statement usually includes an opening phrase, a virtue and how the virtue is being demonstrated or should be shown. Virtues include: acceptance, caring, charity, diligence, generosity, honesty, independence, love and loyalty. There are around 100 virtues included in the seminar's worksheet.

"You were really patient to wait so long," was one example of a virtues statement to acknowledge or thank someone. "Please

be mindful about the volume of your music" is a sentence meant to guide. "Please be kind. That remark hurt," serves to correct behavior.

Another of the strategies is learning to recognize teachable moments, Feldman said. That strategy helps participants recognize the virtues needed daily and learn lessons of character.

Setting clear boundaries based on respect and restorative justice is the third strategy. Learning that lessons can help participants create an atmosphere of peace, cooperation and safety in the home, schools and communities, Feldman said.

The fourth strategy is honoring the spirit by integrating virtues into activities, surroundings, celebrations and the arts, and the fifth is to listen with compassionate curiosity so others can find clarity and create solutions.

Feldman said values and virtues are not the same thing. Virtues are universal character traits, like responsibility and patience, agreed on by all cultures. Values are culture or group specific and are not necessarily virtues, such as the value placed on money around the world.

"The purpose (of the seminar) is to share the strategies with the participants so they are empowered to bring joy, meaning, purpose and peace to St. Croix," Feldman said.

The Virtues Project is reinforced weekly by emails sent to

schools, churches, prisons and government officials that focus on a different virtue each week, she said.

Mike Shea, social worker at YRC, said his director told him about the seminar. He wasn't sure whether he would attend the entire training, but he plans to incorporate virtues into his relationship with inmates at the correctional facility.

"We're always looking for something positive to bring into that environment, anything positive to approach the kids with. At the very least, I would hope it would make me more positive with the kids. We're surrounded by so much negativity," Shea said.

The last three days of the seminar are for those who registered to become facilitators. They will be asked to train at least one group at a school, church or workplace after they are certified.

According to Ellie Hirsh, of CFVI and a member of the early childhood advisory committee, the seminar has been planned since October after a meeting on social and emotional wellness in the community to discuss violence in the territory.

"The goal is to change the community. If we change ourselves, we can change the community," Benjamin said.

The seminar will be held on St. Thomas Nov. 14 to 18. For more information, visit [www.virtuesproject.com](http://www.virtuesproject.com). Contact Mona Quetel 774-6031 to register.