

Daily News Column for 1/10/06

Judith Richardson, columnist (digital photo to come. Profile below)

Proposed Text

It's Time to Raise Our Voices for the Territory's Children

A century and a half ago, the great African-American leader Frederick Douglass said, "It is far easier to build strong children than to repair broken men."

Indeed it is.

As we remind ourselves of this timeless truth, we need to ask ourselves are we in the VI putting our efforts into building strong children...or trying to repair broken men?

Let's take a look. Last month, the community received an early Christmas present, the *2005 US Virgin Islands KIDS COUNT Report*. Compiled and published by the non-partisan Community Foundation of the Virgin Islands (CFVI), this easy-to-read booklet provides a comprehensive data and analysis picture of the children and families living in the USVI today.

Who searches out and reads this booklet? The answer may surprise you. Business owners, parents, teachers, business leaders, health workers, employers, legislators, policemen, congregation members, tax-payers. In short, adults of every kind. The fact is that every adult in the territory has a stake in how our VI children are growing up, and whether these children will be making a difference for better – or worse – in our community, now and later.

Business owners and employers search the data with an eye to whether our island youth is becoming educated to a level of effective employability. Good employees are essential to ongoing business health.

Teachers look at the current rate of child poverty (now 1 in every 3 VI children), to forewarn and forearm themselves, knowing that poverty doubles the risks of children's learning-delays, repeating a grade, of losing ground and eventually dropping out.

Legislators get an updated read on the areas of acute need, and the numbers of young citizens represented.

Some of the greatest challenges facing our children, as reported in the KC 2005 Report are:

- **Poverty.** The greatest challenge is that *almost a third (or 32.3%) of US Virgin Islands children are growing up in poverty*. Our child poverty rates have remained above 30% since KIDS COUNT started collecting data. The national rate is 18%. While poverty in the USVI is significantly linked to an exceptionally high rate of single motherhood, it is also highly predictive of subsequent risks to children: decreased cognitive or learning development, and decreased physical and social health. Children growing up in poverty are twice as likely to be abused or neglected, more likely to fall behind in school, more likely to become arrested and incarcerated when grown, and almost twice as likely to be impoverished as adults.

- **Family strength.** Of all VI children, almost 2/3rds (61%) do not live with their 2 married parents. Children raised without their biological fathers are 200-300% more likely to be growing up in poverty. More than 1/3 (35%) of all VI children live in single

female parent households (these single-mother households make up almost 42% of all VI families).

- **Juvenile Crime.** The crime arrest rate for VI youth age 10-17 has spiked in recent years, and (at 458 per 100,000) is now almost twice the rate of the rest of the nation.

- **Educational attainment.** Most-recent figures show that 28% of VI youth age 21-24 still had less than a high school diploma. The attainment of a high school degree (at least) is strongly linked to an individual's ability to become and remain employed, support a family, and contribute to the social stability and economic growth of their community, especially for the one-third of Virgin Islands children (numbering 10,740 children) who are at greatest risk because they are growing up in poverty.

What can we, as adults, do to help build stronger children? We can start by becoming a "voice" for the 30,000 voice-less children in the community. *Voices For V.I. Children* is a local children's advocacy group started by The Community Foundation of the Virgin Islands as a response to the data reported in the KIDS COUNT reports over the years. *Voices For VI Children* is a non-partisan, children's advocacy group open to all, whose only agenda is to advocate for the children in the territory. We invite you to join in.

The KIDS COUNT 2005 Report is a good resource to begin with. It is a useful tool that sheds light on the areas where work is needed. The booklet is available at no charge through the Community Foundation of the Virgin Islands in downtown St. Thomas. You may stop by and pick up a copy, access the report online at www.cfvi.net, or call 774-6031 for a copy to be sent to you.

Other ways to become an advocate and help build stronger children include the following:

- Speak up within your community of friends and associates
- Organize and mobilize your neighbors and friends
- Partner with professional groups who have like interests
- Write a letter to the editor, especially regarding solutions or recommendations to benefit many of the territory's children
- Listen to what policy makers are saying regarding key issues affecting children and families
- Testify at public hearings on concerns affecting VI children
- Ask candidates where they stand on issues affecting children and families
- VOTE!!

Simply put, children cannot easily make their voices heard to those who can bring about changes for them. But ordinary adults can. And advocacy is the tool. Many voices raised together are our nation's --and our islands' -- most effective way to get positive changes made.

Let's take Frederick Douglass' wisdom -- and act on it.

Judith Richardson