

Op-Ed: A Return to Civility

 stthomassource.com/content/2026/06/24/op-ed-a-return-to-civility

June 24, 2026

Every time another young life is lost to violence in the Virgin Islands, we ask the same questions. What is wrong with our children? Where are the parents? Why are our young people becoming so violent? Perhaps it is time we ask a different question. What if our children are simply becoming more like us?

For decades, adults have lamented the behavior of young people while largely ignoring the culture we have created around them. We consume violence as entertainment. We model hostility in our politics. We weaponize social media. We humiliate one another publicly. We normalize cruelty, gossip, division, and disrespect. We work quietly behind the scenes with malice to punish and exact revenge. We have become increasingly comfortable with uncivilized ways of being, then act surprised when our children mirror what they see.

Executive Director Deanna James of
the St. Croix Foundation. (Photo by
Nicole Canegata)

Years ago, long before social media tightened its grip on childhood, St. Croix Foundation's Youth Advisory Council surveyed young people across our community. Their conclusion was both simple and profound: the greatest challenge they faced was the lack of positive adult role models. Not poverty. Not academics. Not crime, substance abuse, or teen pregnancy. Adults. That finding should haunt us because while individual parents certainly bear responsibility for raising their children, the burden cannot rest on their shoulders alone. Every child is shaped not only by a household, but by a community; by a society; by teachers and coaches; by elected officials and clergy; by business leaders and neighbors; by what they see celebrated and what they see tolerated.

The uncomfortable truth is that youth violence is not merely a youth problem. It is an adult problem with youth consequences. If we are serious about reversing the trajectory of violence in our territory, then we must move beyond outrage and begin redesigning

the social conditions that produce it. We need fewer conversations about punishment and more conversations about culture.

What are we teaching children about empathy? What are we teaching them about conflict? What are we teaching them about respect, self-control, responsibility, integrity, ethics, love, and humanity?

One promising example lies in the expansion of Public Montessori education, not as a single solution, but as part of a larger commitment to educating the whole child. Montessori is often mistaken for simply an alternative academic model. In reality, it is a comprehensive approach to human development that teaches children collaboration instead of domination, conflict resolution instead of aggression, and self-discipline instead of coercion. It intentionally cultivates the virtues that can serve as the foundation of peaceful societies. Because if violence can be learned, then peace can be taught.

We should also have the courage to confront the growing evidence surrounding social media and smartphone use. Scholars such as [Jonathan Haidt](#) have argued that unrestricted access to social media is contributing to unprecedented levels of anxiety, isolation, and social dysfunction among young people. Policies once considered radical — limiting smartphone use, restricting social media access for minors, and removing phones from schools — are now being implemented around the world because the evidence demands action as the crisis confronting our youth grows too severe for half measures.

As the old proverb reminds us: “The child who is not embraced by the village will burn it down to feel its warmth.” It’s a stark wake-up call for our Village where, far too often, clichés about our “Youth Being Our Future” negate the responsibility demanded from us. If the village is fractured, angry, unkind, and uncivil, we should not be surprised when our children struggle to build peace.

Ultimately, the solution to youth violence will not be found in a single program, policy, new school, arrest, conviction, or even election. It will emerge only when we collectively decide that civility matters. That kindness matters. That empathy matters. And, that the way we treat one another matters. The question before us today is not whether our children are watching. They are. The fundamental question we must ask ourselves is whether we have the courage to become the examples they deserve.

— Deanna James, President and CEO of the St. Croix Foundation

Editor's Note: Opinion articles do not represent the views of the Virgin Islands Source newsroom and are the sole expressed opinion of the writer. Submissions can be made to visource@gmail.com.

Keeping our community informed is our top priority.

If you have a news tip to share, please call or text us at 340-244-6631.

Support local + independent journalism in the U.S. Virgin Islands

Unlike many news organizations, we haven't put up a paywall – we want to keep our journalism as accessible as we can. Our independent journalism costs time, money and hard work to keep you informed, but we do it because we believe that it matters. We know that informed communities are empowered ones. If you appreciate our reporting and want to help make our future more secure, please consider donating.

[Donate](#)

[Previous article](#)

[Next article](#)

[VI JOB OPPORTUNITIES](#)
