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As VI History Struggles in Schools, a St. Thomas Native Teaches Thousands on Social Media

With VI history still inconsistently taught in schools, St. Thomas native Shani DeWindt is using carefully researched social media videos to correct misinformation, spotlight overlooked narratives, and make local history accessible to a growing audience.

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The U.S. flag raised as Denmark formally transferred the Virgin Islands to American control on March 31, 1917. By. NATIONAL MUSEUM OF DENMARK / NATIONALMUSEET.

While education officials in the U.S. Virgin Islands still [work on figuring out the kinks](#) when it comes to incorporating Virgin Islands History in the public school curriculum, one native Virgin

Islander is using [social media](#) to make local history more accessible.

Shani DeWindt was born and raised in St. Thomas and has traced her paternal lineage in the Virgin Islands at least eight generations. The DeWindt name is Dutch, with her family moving to the territory from St. Eustacius generations ago. Growing up, Ms. DeWindt told the Consortium, her family exposed her to local history and was themselves “a part of making Virgin Islands history.” Several family members played integral roles in various administrations.

Ms. DeWindt, who skipped 9th Grade and moved to the mainland for college at only age 15, “never had a Virgin Islands history class.” Despite a thriving career in politics in Washington D.C., Ms. DeWindt always remained enchanted by the history of her home. She told the Consortium that much of her knowledge was gained through oral history and the limited number of textbooks she could find on the subject. Despite the rigors of work, she clung to the “hobby of really telling Virgin Islands history.”

In 2021, Ms. DeWindt turned to Instagram, creating a profile focused on Virgin Islands History “because the wrong history was just coming out, especially in digital spaces.” She said that even government agencies were “just sharing the wrong information.” Members of the public, Ms. DeWindt said, would often cite incorrect information relating to key historical events, such as the Fireburn.



Shani DeWindt

“They'll say, you know, the three queens, or Queen Mary, and I will always go on to these forums and correct them and say, no, there were four queens. This is actual history. These are their names,” Ms. DeWindt lamented. Regular misinformation is what prompted her to “just start making videos of my own and point out the real history.”

In 2023, she produced a series of social media videos titled “The Making of Charlotte Amalie”, which featured a walking tour of the iconic capital. In 2025, she featured some more “interesting parts of downtown Charlotte Amalie.”

Validity and accuracy are a critical part of the work that Ms. DeWindt does. “I have a strict rule of when I research, I have to have three sources, at a minimum,” she assured the Consortium. The book *Umbilical Cord, VI History*, written by Associate Justice of the Virgin Islands Supreme Court Harold W.L. Willocks, features heavily.

Ms. DeWindt’s work is complicated by the “scattered” nature of the territory’s historical archives. Under Danish rule, archives were sent to Denmark, while under U.S. rule, they went to the mainland. “So they’re split,” she explained. There are also smaller collections scattered among families and organizations.

Locally, history isn’t always the most accessible. “Our government in the U.S. Virgin Islands hasn’t done a great job in terms of archiving the materials that we have in the Virgin Islands,” Ms. DeWindt stated.

She says that after the 2017 storms, many archives were sent to the mainland for restoration, but there are challenges associated with local archives as well. “We have these libraries in the Virgin Islands that are still under repair or not accessible to the public... In St. Thomas, at the Turnbull Library, there's a Von Schulten section, which should be like our archive history, but every time I go there...there's no one who can give me access to it,” Ms. DeWindt said.

She has been trying to access those records for five years. “Access to it would strengthen anyone's history,” she noted. Ms. DeWindt suggested that allowing the territory’s teaching staff access to this important historical data could better help educators to “pass down the knowledge to the kids.”

Notwithstanding the immense challenges, Ms. DeWindt remains fueled by her love for Virgin Islands history and a desire to ensure that as many people as possible share accurate information about the territory. After cross-referencing information and validating sources, she collects relevant images, prepares a script, records a voiceover, and produces short clips for social media.

Recent topics featured by Ms. DeWindt include how the territory [cunningly adapted during Prohibition](#) and the [origins of the Virgin Islands March](#), written by Alton Adams.

She says that she has learnt a wealth of information since beginning this passion project. The rebel queens from Fire Burn, she said, “were sent to Copenhagen wearing gold earrings.” She linked this historical data points to current trends in the territory. “You could spot a Virgin Islander just by them wearing gold Gucci chain. Always, always, always have jewelry.”

“It's been really positive,” she said, referencing the public’s reception to her work. Ms. DeWindt suggests that social media is an “example of how they can teach Virgin Islands history.” Her idea of a comprehensive curriculum includes “writing research, archiving, field trips to the other islands and visiting local historic places, integrating AI and technology and also invigorating creative thinking.”

Ms. DeWindt is hoping to continue her work on the ground, as she escapes the cold winter of Washington D.C. for the warmth of St. Thomas this year. “Senator Myron Jackson has reached out to me to help with his cultural civic museum,” she said. She is also hopeful that the Departments of Education or Tourism will become involved in the work that she has started.

Ultimately, Ms. DeWindt is working to create a “community that cares about where they come from, and then you have a community that's engaged.”

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