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## Youth Pageantry Opens Crucian Christmas Festival as Duchess, Princess and Junior Miss Are Crowned

Young contestants took center stage Friday night, showcasing leadership, culture, fashion, and talent as the first major pageant of the 2025–2026 Crucian Christmas Festival crowned new Duchess, Princess, and Junior Miss titleholders.

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ST. CROIX — The pageantry and excitement of the 2025–2026 Crucian Christmas Festival came into full view Friday night as young contestants took center stage to compete for the titles of Duchess, Princess, and Junior Miss, marking one of the festival’s first major events of the season.

The evening opened with introductions and interview segments, a familiar format that allowed judges and the audience to hear directly from the contestants about leadership, service, and

personal growth. The Junior Miss division appeared first, with Blessing Phillip, LaShonte Joseph, Shanice Pilgrim, and Kayda Baird-Williams stepping forward in sequined gowns and confident smiles.

Asked how they balance personal growth with serving others, Ms. Phillip cited her involvement in JROTC and her high school dance and cheer teams. Ms. Joseph emphasized the importance of maintaining a well-rounded schedule that allows her to care for herself while supporting family and friends. Ms. Pilgrim highlighted rest and self-care as essential, while Ms. Baird-Williams spoke in favor of placing community needs first.

Princess division contestants followed, offering their perspectives on leadership at a young age. Jaelyn Rodrigues said leadership, to her, means responsibility and maturity. Iridessa Daniels spoke about respecting elders, taking responsibility for others, and setting a positive example. Je'Talia Hanley focused on character, describing leadership as kindness and rejecting bullying, fighting, and negative behavior both in person and online.

The youngest participant of the night, and the only contestant in the Duchess category, earned one of the loudest responses from the audience. Talia Simmonds spoke simply but confidently about kindness, telling the crowd, "Don't bully, we help each other," drawing enthusiastic applause.

Following the interview portion, Junior Miss contestants returned to the stage for swimwear presentations. Each appeared in modest maillots enhanced with beads and sequins, offering distinct interpretations while adhering to competition guidelines.

Fashion segments followed, beginning with the school fun category. Ms. Simmonds debuted a Roaring 20s-inspired look that incorporated the colors of Good Hope Country Day School. Her flapper-style orange dress featured rhinestones, black gloves, shoes, and a feathered headpiece, complemented by a sequined orange cape trimmed in black feathers.

Princess contestants then took the stage under an "80s hip-hop" theme, delivering energetic looks marked by bright colors, balloon pants, leg warmers, and playful on-stage costume changes. Junior Miss competitors followed with a "preppy" theme, showcasing a range of styles from avant-garde designs to classic ensembles featuring letter sweaters, plaid skirts, and berets.

Cultural dress marked one of the evening's most significant segments, with contestants paying tribute to Crucian heritage. Their costumes reflected food traditions, music, festivals, and environmental themes, offering visual storytelling rooted in local culture.

The talent segment came next, giving each contestant four minutes to demonstrate a special skill. Princess competitors Ms. Rodrigues and Ms. Daniels performed vocal selections, while Ms. Hanley combined dance with an aerial hoop routine. Junior Miss contestants presented a variety of performances, including dance, drama, steelpan music, and gymnastics.

Once all segments concluded, the outgoing royal court returned for their final walk before judges announced the results.

As the sole contestant in her category, Talia Simmonds was crowned Duchess of St. Croix. Jaelyn Rodrigues earned the title of Princess, with Je'Talia Hanley and Iridessa Daniels named second and third runners-up. In the Junior Miss division, LaShonte Joseph claimed the crown, followed by Kayda Baird-Williams as first runner-up and Shanice Pilgrim as second runner-up.

The night set a celebratory tone for the weeks ahead, officially ushering in the youth-centered pageantry of the Crucian Christmas Festival season.

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