

## Skills Center Graduates 151 as Career Training Leads to Job Offers for More Than Half the Class

The 151-member Skills Center class includes more than half already offered jobs, 67 high-honor graduates, 12 dual certifications, and training in phlebotomy, EMT, massage therapy, cosmetology, barbering, HVAC, carpentry and skilled fields and trades.

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A graduate of the Raphael O. Wheatley Skill Center celebrates onstage after receiving her certificate during the 2026 commencement ceremony, as instructors and fellow graduates applaud the milestone. **By. V.I. CONSORTIUM.**

The Raphael O. Wheatley Skills Center celebrated 151 graduates Wednesday evening, with more than half of the class already receiving job offers in their fields and speakers emphasizing the role

of technical education in building careers, strengthening the workforce and helping students move beyond their circumstances.

Principal Mario Francis opened the 2026 graduation ceremony by pointing to the immediate value of the training graduates had completed. More than half of the class has already been offered employment in their area of expertise, he said, describing the outcome as evidence that career and technical education can produce quick returns.

The institute, Mr. Francis declared, “is not just granting degrees for individuals, but we’re also supporting the workforce.”

He also highlighted the class’s academic and technical achievements. Sixty-seven students graduated with high honors, while 12 received dual certifications. Graduates completed programs that prepared them as phlebotomists, emergency medical technicians, medical massage therapists, cosmetologists, barbers, HVAC technicians and in other trades and technical specializations.

Throughout the evening, speakers returned to the importance of resilience, adaptability and continuing to learn when life does not move according to plan.

“Life brings you a lot of challenges and disappointments and unexpected obstacles. Just learn to stay level in them,” Mr. Francis advised.

“The world you’re entering is constantly evolving,” said Monique Faulkner, State Director of Career and Technical Education in the Department of Education. “The true key to success lies in lifelong learning. It lies in adaptability and perseverance,” she continued.

The graduating class reflected two common paths into career and technical education: young students seeking marketable skills and adult learners adding new training to existing careers.

Anthony Mardenborough Jr., chair of the Virgin Islands Board of Career and Technical Education, spoke directly to younger graduates about the doubts they may face.

“As a young person myself, I can tell you the judgment is real. The ridicule is real. People will doubt you, people will question your vision, people underestimate your potential,” he warned.

He encouraged them to keep “proving them wrong, not through arguments, not through anger, but through excellence, through discipline, through faith, through consistency.”

Salutatorian Shem Matthew represented another part of the class’s story. A visual arts educator by profession, he graduated Wednesday with a certification in carpentry and reflected on the humility required to return to the classroom as a student.

“Becoming a student again was humbling,” he said. “I was used to leading the classrooms, not sitting in them...I had to relearn how to listen without interrupting, which was hard to do, how to struggle without immediately having the answer, how to grow without needing to control the process.”

His experience, he said, was a reminder that “no matter how much we know, it was always something new to learn, and sometimes the best thing we can do is to allow ourselves to be beginners again.”

Education Commissioner Dionne Wells-Hedrington, in congratulatory remarks, addressed Mr. Matthew and other educators who had completed skills courses.

“I know there's several educators that took skills courses,” she said. “Please don't leave, don't leave the Department of Education, just do that on the side,” she quipped, noting that the territory still needs them in classrooms.

Valedictorian Klidenchy Felix spoke about sacrifice, transition and survival, themes that have appeared throughout several graduation ceremonies this season.

“As an immigrant who left Haiti at 11 years old, I learned early that strength is often built through transition, sacrifice and survival. Every challenge I faced became part of the foundation that led me to this stage today,” she declared.

She credited her mother's determination to build a better life as a model for her own aspirations. “You carried more than I could ever imagine, and your resilience became the blueprint of my own,” Ms. Felix declared.

She closed by reminding her classmates that their current circumstances do not have to determine what comes next. “Your current circumstances do not determine your future. Your setbacks do not define you. Your struggle does not disqualify you,” the valedictorian concluded.

Lieutenant Governor Tregenza Roach celebrated Ms. Felix and other graduates across the territory who come from immigrant backgrounds. “We have all these cultures that come together in this beautiful place, and we ought to use it as an opportunity to learn and to grow,” he said.

He encouraged graduates to recognize the value of collaboration and to look for opportunities to work with those around them. “There are opportunities for us to join together, to collaborate, and to take advantage of opportunity. So, don't miss that opportunity because you didn't pay attention to who is sitting next to you,” he urged.

Keynote speaker Romani Richardson, an advanced emergency medical technician preparing to begin medical school, described how technical education can support a path into traditional professional fields.

As a student at the Raphael O. Wheatley Skills Center, he said he was “a young father, a recent college graduate, and an aspiring physician trying to find my path.” He credited the school with giving him “something priceless....It gave me a foundation, it gave me confidence, it gave me proof that my circumstances did not have to define my destiny.”

One of the most important lessons the Skills Center taught him, Mr. Richardson said, was the value of beginning even before feeling fully prepared.

“You do not need to feel ready to begin. You simply need the courage to take the first step.”

Purpose, he said, matters more than perfect preparation.

“Purpose is what keeps you moving when the path becomes difficult. Purpose is what turns obstacles into opportunities for growth.