BY JAMES GARDNER — OCTOBER 28, 2015

UVI Hackathon Gives Students a Chance to Develop New Phone Apps

The inaugural HackFest event on St. Croix gave teams of University of the Virgin Islands students a little more than 24 hours to conceptualize and present their plans for a new phone app that focuses on "real" issues in the territory, according to organizers. [1]

Last weekend's marathon competition was sponsored by software developer NEARiX and saw three St. Croix campus teams competing for cash prizes and a textbook scholarship.

The St. Thomas campus HackFest will be Nov. 6-7, according to Timothy Faley, UVI entrepreneurship professor and special assistant to the president.

Faley said the students don't come prepared with ideas for an app and they "don't have any idea who they're working with." He said they hold an initial idea session on the first night to give the students "a chance to think about team building." They begin working together the next morning.

Faley said the actual app isn't put together during the hackathon, but students create an image and verbal description of their product to present to the judges.

"They refine and refine and refine right up until they're presenting," Faley said. "And we're so excited about what they came up with" on St. Croix.

Judges awarded "Best Hack" and $500 to students Max Peerman Daniels and Tijani Shabazz, whose app "Where's Da Lyme?" would give locals and visitors a chance to check out what's happening around the island in real time. The app also would give the user options for transportation that could get them to a particular event.

Shawn Olson and Jemanuel Viera won most "Impactful Hack" for an "AquaLast" phone app to monitor the user's cistern levels and send an alert when their water is running low. An order could also be sent to a local water delivery service.

The Olson-Viera team also picked up the $100 textbook scholarship for "Best Sustainable Hack," an award sponsored by UVI's EPSCoR.

The four-person team of Idrees Donaie, Rahim Donaie, Alexis Murrain and Khadijah O'Neill won "Most Innovative Hack" for their app "Pocketversity," which would allow

students to make payments at the bookstore, cafeteria and other places around campus through a phone payment service connected to their student account. The app also has a calendar feature that would allow students to track their class schedule and other important events.

"The teams began with the process of generating very interesting new phone apps, but longer term, we hope this gets them into creating new businesses and being more innovative," Faley said. "What we tend to teach in most university courses is best practices, how things are done, and events like this allow students to think outside the box and better those best practices."

Hackathon is currently only open to UVI students, but Faley said judging from the success of the inaugural event, it could eventually be expanded.

"These kind of hackathons started about 10 years ago in Silicon Valley, when companies like Facebook started having them to draw out new ideas from employees," Faley explained. "Yahoo and Google have had similar things and in recent years, they've started to sponsor community hackathons and, long term, that could be where we end up."

Faley said he measures the success of the hackathon by the dedication of the students that participated on St. Croix, who even skipped meals to get the work done.

"It was just after noon on the Saturday when I went into the library on St. Croix," Faley said. "The students had been working all day. They were spread across the building and, when I said they should take a break, each team looked at me individually and said, 'Do we have to?' And it doesn't get any better than that."

"When you have students on a Saturday willing to forgo food to keep working on their app, you know they're excited," Faley said. "To me, right there, it was a successful event."

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