

Youngsters learn lifesaving sea safety, thanks to Virgin Islands Search and Rescue.

Island life is full of beauty, but living so close to the water also comes with dangers. That is why the Virgin Islands Search and Rescue (VISAR), of which the Governor is a patron, have been leading fantastic work to educate BVI's young people on beach safety.

VISAR welcomed third graders from Althea Scatliffe Primary School to their base in Tortola, where the children had a go at knot tying and learnt about the importance of wearing a life jacket while on the water. The team had previously met the same students when they went to the ice skating rink at VISAR's Winter Wonderland fundraiser and they were excited to have the opportunity to follow up with further safety information. The children were eager to know when the ice rink was going to open again!

Sixth grade classes also got a chance to visit VISAR's headquarters. Staff member Julie Schneider told students about the non-profit side of the organisation, the volunteering options available and how to become a member of the crew. Students heard when and when not to call VISAR, and the phone numbers to use for an emergency both on land or at sea.

Stephen Ganga, a current VISAR trainee and ex pupil of Althea Scatliffe Primary School, said:

“Volunteering teaches the value of willingness to learn. It opens opportunities for success where one gains knowledge and experiences first hand. Volunteering boosts self-confidence and motivates one to acquire additional skills that can be used at one point or another in life”

The 10-11 year olds heard from Rebecca Nockolds from BVI swim school on beach safety, including how to avoid dangerous rip tides. Children learnt how they should spread their arms and legs wide and float on their backs if they get into trouble in the water, and wait for rescue.

Pupils heard about the technical side of working at VISAR: from the benefits of a very high frequency (VHF) radio versus a phone, what a chart is and the co-ordinator's role in saving lives at sea. In the most exciting part of the day, the students explored parts of the boats and saw extra equipment, before getting to have a go in the driving seat. They also learnt from trainee Roiley Christopher and crew member Kahrim Skelton how to use a splint and life jacket- vital skills for any search and rescue officer.

VISAR is an independent, volunteer-based non-profit organisation funded by charitable donations. It has been saving lives at sea since 1988, when a team of advisers from the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office advised the Government of BVI to merge informal search and rescue services to create a dedicated volunteer organisation. VISAR officially formed at the request of the Government, modelled on the UK's Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI), the world's oldest lifeboat service.

Governor John Rankin, who is patron for the service, visited the team based in Virgin Gorda. He said:

“I am a proud patron of VISAR. The volunteers provide 24-hour cover to keep seafarers safe and have already responded to five calls this year. Young people are the future of BVI, so VISAR’s work inspiring children to support the search and rescue service and learn potentially lifesaving safety tips is a blessing.”

The crew in Virgin Gorda and Tortola mirror each other when it comes to training techniques and equipment carried on the rescue vessels, although they face different challenges due to their location. The Governor learnt the Virgin Gorda crew have the added challenge of keeping a patient who needs medical attention safe while crossing the channel to the main hospital in Tortola. The team also cover Anegada, which can mean long and potentially rough sea journeys have to be factored into a rescue.

During his visit, the Governor heard how the volunteers work closely with the Royal British Virgin Islands police, fire, and ambulance services as well as the United States Coastguard. He learnt how they aim to continually update crew training and modernise their boats and equipment to offer the best possible support to BVI. VISAR is internationally recognised by the International Maritime Rescue Federation as a full member. Marine emergencies can be reported at +1(284) 499 0911.