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Planet Green Force partners with Gifft Hill School for sustainability

By SUZANNE CARLSON Daily News Staff
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Harith Wickrema, Island Green president and founder of Planet Green Force, second from right, with Curtis Penn, Island Green board member and treasurer, with Liz Kinsella, Gifft Hill Head of School, first from left, with GHS students Wiley Batten, Leanna O'Neal, Darianny Peguero, and Cleo Kinsella on Thursday at GHS on St. John. Wickrema presented GHS students with a \$50,000 check to help the school continue its nutrition and climate security programs.

Photo by GIFFT HILL SCHOOL

Planet Green Force has named Gifft Hill School on St. John as the sustainability nonprofit's first partner school in the Virgin Islands, and is working to help students engage in nutrition and climate security projects.

Founder and volunteer Harith Wickrema presented students with a \$50,000 check at a ceremony Thursday, and said the funding will help the school continue projects that have been in progress for years with assistance from Island Green Living.

The school already has gardening, aquaponics, hydroponics, recycling, and more, so "the program is already there but we need to hire people and get them tools to continue at a higher level," Wickrema said.

"We are excited to become a Planet Green Force partner school because the organization's vision so closely reflects the work Gifft Hill School has been doing for years," said Head of School Liz Kinsella. "Our commitment to sustainability is central to who we are as a school. This partnership will help us build upon that strong foundation while connecting our students to a broader global movement and to educational frameworks developed in collaboration with UNESCO."

Wickrema said Planet Green Force's first chapter was established in Sri Lanka, with plans to expand globally and help educate students on the impact of climate change, which is causing extreme drought, wildfires, and natural disasters such as the recent floods in Nepal.

"Food security, energy security, plastic pollution, coral bleaching, and other environmental challenges are not distant or abstract issues, they are real-life challenges that we, as island communities, experience firsthand," said Wickrema, who officially founded nonprofit Planet Green Force in 2024. "Greening education should be a priority for the legislators and administrators. Island Green will stand by the commitment to provide advice and insight on navigation to prioritize greening education territory-wide. The 14,000 school children in our territory will in turn motivate and education their families and the community. In this way, we can help shape a more resilient future for our territory and beyond."

Wickrema said that Gifft Hill will serve as a model for others, and the expectation is that additional schools will be brought on in the future.

“Our hope is whoever the next governor is, whoever the next commissioner of Education is will embrace such programs, and Planet Green Force and Island Green will stand ready to advise and show the road map,” Wickrema said.

Gifft Hill School has 200 students, and Wickrema said he hopes that public school students will have the same opportunity to learn how to grow crops like chaya, a nutritious, drought-resistant plant.

Wickrema said that Cydney Meadows, the Education Department’s Territorial Director for sustainability and agriculture, is working hard alongside Sumayah Bryan and others, such as Sommer Sibilly-Brown of Virgin Islands Good Food, and the V.I. Local Food and Farm Council.

“We are making small strides, but if we get the 14,000 public school students as our agents of change and give them the most powerful tools to combat climate change? What’s the most powerful tool? Education,” Wickrema said.

For more information visit islandgreenliving.org and planetgreenforce.org.

Suzanne Carlson