

Peer mentoring

Manor's Jr. RANCH cadets learn from Central's JROTC

TOMEADER

ST. CROIX — Cadets from the Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps (JROTC) at St. Croix Central High School have been mentoring members of the Junior Restoring And Nurturing Childhood Hope (Jr. RANCH) program at The Manor School throughout the semester.

On Thursday, the cadets from the Jr. RANCH program rehearsed drills they will perform during their upcoming awards ceremony scheduled for 5 p.m. June 28 at The Manor School.

Augustus Laurenctn Jr., 16, a junior at CHS, and Yhadira Martinez, 15, a junior at CHS, are two of the JROTC members who have been working with the Jr. RANCH cadets.

"We first began teaching them to control anger, management and conflict resolution," Martinez said, indicating she and Laurenctn showed the Jr. RANCH cadets alternative ways to resolve their problems.

After working with the JROTC throughout the semester, Martinez said she thinks the Jr. RANCH cadets are on their way to success.

"I think the program really helped them mature to see what life really is," she said.

Laurenctn said it makes him feel good to make a difference in the lives of the Jr. RANCH cadets.

"They're more observant, they listen more and they listen to what each other have to say," he said.

In addition to taking orders and learning about conflict resolution from the JROTC cadets, the Jr. RANCH cadets receive instruction from Staff Sgt. Eleides Villafane and Col. Patrick Cuffy, a former Marine and deputy sheriff who started the Jr. RANCH program.

"The program is developed as a second chance opportunity for kids who needed that opportunity," Cuffy said, indicating when he was



Tom Eader

Members of the Junior Restoring And Nurturing Childhood Hope (Jr. RANCH) program at The Manor School rehearse on campus Thursday for their upcoming awards ceremony scheduled for 5 p.m. June 28 at the school. They are seen wearing their Class A uniforms, which will be worn during formal ceremonies and were purchased with a grant from the Community Foundation of the Virgin Islands.

a youth he got suspended from Arthur A. Richards Junior High School and received a second chance himself.

The Jr. RANCH program is a new, in-school program at The Manor School which started last fall to provide opportunities for young public school students experiencing academic failure and behavioral problems. Administered by Camp "Positive" Motivation, a non-profit organization established on St. Croix in 2006, the program uses a multi-disciplinary approach to provide opportunities for at-risk youth.

For the 2009-2010 school year, 10 at-risk students from public elementary schools were selected by public school guidance counselors and awarded full scholarships to attend The Manor School and enroll in the Jr. RANCH program, which

currently serves 18 male and female students between the ages of 12 and 16 years old. Eight students from The Manor School, who do not receive tuition scholarships, elected to join the program and serve as role models for their fellow cadets.

The Jr. RANCH program, which consists of a 45-minute class held daily at The Manor School, focuses on a small, private school setting and academic curriculum, professional counseling and a military-style behavioral modification program.

"It's a no nonsense, in-your-face approach," Cuffy said.

The program extends beyond the classroom to include after-school tutoring, camping trips, marching presentations and community service activities. Jr. RANCH strives to improve students' academic per-

formance and skill sets, develop leadership skills, strengthen character, build self-discipline and promote positive behavior and conflict resolution.

Focusing on its mission to provide a balanced approach that teaches youth to connect the consequences of their actions to their behavior and the choices they make, the Jr. RANCH program targets 6th-grade students who are disruptive in class, continually getting suspended for behavioral misconduct and failing their classes, as well as those students who may require more individualized attention.

Although Cuffy said he has seen a lot of improvement in the Jr. RANCH cadets, he said they still have a long way to go. Initially, he said the students were reluctant to be in the program, but they have

since become involved with it. He said he hopes to expand the program into other schools throughout the territory.

"In the future, the intent is to expand to all schools throughout St. Croix, and, hopefully, it trickles down to St. Thomas and St. John," Cuffy said.

Casim Phipps, 14, a seventh-grader at The Manor School, is just one of the cadets involved in the Jr. RANCH program. He said he thinks his experience in the program has helped him become more successful in school. Phipps said he would encourage his friends and fellow classmates to enroll in the Jr. RANCH program in order to become more successful in life.

"It's very good for students who have bad discipline actions in school and it helps them do better in school," he said.

Maj. Fernando Webster, senior Army instructor for the JROTC at CHS, said his JROTC cadets get to show the Jr. RANCH cadets what they have learned while serving as mentors.

"I think it's a win-win situation because we have a requirement to do service learning and we get to accomplish that by mentoring these kids," he said.

Webster said the JROTC will continue assisting and mentoring the Jr. RANCH program on an ongoing basis.

"We're going to assist this program as much as we can to bring them up to the level they should be at," he said.

Villafane said the most rewarding part of being an instructor in the Jr. RANCH program for her is seeing the students achieve something they didn't think they could, such as completing the COPE (Challenging Outdoor Personal Experience) course at the Howard Wall Boy Scouts camp.

"They're very good kids," she said. "They just need a little guidance."