

EDUCATION

Addressing a 'hidden barrier' to education

The Dignified Girl Project places free sanitary napkin machines in schools

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The Dignified Girl Project (DGP) has addressed an unspoken concern, or "hidden barrier" to education with the launch of its latest initiative, a free sanitary napkin machine initiative.

Since September 2023 DGP has outfitted 16 schools – 14 on New Providence, including one special needs school, and two schools in the Family Islands – with the machines, according to Phillipa Dean, DGP founder. It's an initiative which is in keeping with one of the goals of the non-profit, which is to increase menstruating adolescent and pre-adolescent females access to menstrual hygiene products, and reduce the girl's likelihood of sitting out of class or missing school because they don't have access to sanitary napkins.

"Whenever my team and I are able to set a goal that increases our impact in the community, my feelings are always one of pride and fulfilment," said Dean.

Schools that are participating and have received machines are R.M. Bailey Senior High School, Government High School, C.C. Sweeting Senior High School, T.A. Thompson Junior High School, A.F. Adderley Junior High School, H.O. Nash Junior High School, C.H. Reeves Junior High School, S.C. McPherson Junior High School, Centre for The Deaf, Sandilands Primary School, Uriah McPhee Primary School, University of The Bahamas, Queen's College, and The Willimae Pratt School for Girls.

Machines were also installed in Mangrove Cay High School on Andros, and Preston H. Albury High School on South Eleuthera. "It was important to go this route to expand our reach," she said. "We recognized that we were not reaching the masses of school-aged girls and what better way to do so than to find them at school."

Since the installations of machines in September 2023 to December 2023, DGP officials said they had al-

ready distributed more than 1,300 free sanitary napkins through the machines.

The free sanitary napkin machine was introduced to school guidance counselors and students in May 2023 at The Dignified Girl Project's annual "My Period My Pride" education seminar. It was at that time that DGP volunteers demonstrated the use and purpose of the machine.

Dean said it was in April 2021, DGP in conjunction with the guidance counseling department of the Ministry of Education, engaged in research study to assess the feminine hygiene needs of adolescent female students.

"We conducted a virtual survey among sixth through twelfth-grade girls in the primary, junior, and senior public schools to assess the need for essential hygiene products and their impact on school attendance and participation."

She said the data collected from their feminine health and hygiene survey 2021 highlighted the need for services offered by DGP among sixth through twelfth-grade students.

"Specific areas of need include education on managing menstrual health and hygiene, which includes but is not limited to the management of symptoms, and support for girls who are prevented from participating either in school, extra-curricular activities, or both



Carolyn Thompson, second right, Mangrove Cay High School principal; and Danique Dorsette, left, Mangrove Cay High School senior mistress, with students Prenia Moxey, prefect; and Devanae Outten, with a free sanitary napkin machine donated to the school by the Dignified Girl Project (DGP). The machine dispenses free sanitary napkins to female students. PHOTOS: DIGNIFIED GIRL PROJECT



Chad Wood, second left, Dignified Girl Project (DGP) volunteer; and Sara-Manson Wood, right, DGP treasurer, present a free sanitary napkin machine to R.M. Bailey Senior High School Principal Shari Russell, second right. At left is Tamara Bethel, R.M. Bailey Senior High School guidance counselor.



Vernique Russell, second right, Dignified Girl Project (DGP) volunteer, presents a free sanitary napkin machine to personnel at Government High School (GHS). Also pictured from left are Tarintina Mills, guidance counselor; Charis Swann, past president of Rotaract Club of Nassau Sunset; Pavia Rolle, GHS principal; and Keri Walker, guidance counselor.

because of their period." Dean said they concluded that there is a need to support adolescents with menstruation in The Bahamas. She also said notably, more than 40 percent of the students surveyed did not obtain undergarments, specifically panties and brassieres more than twice a year, and had difficulty purchasing or obtaining feminine hygiene product at some point.

Dean said of the initial 16 schools identified for the first phase of the free sanitary napkin machine installation, one school administrator opted not to participate in the program, and was replaced by another school. Other than the one school, she said the participating school administrations, guidance counselors, and teachers participating in phase one supported the initiative and continue to express gratitude.

"We hope that in our evaluation of this first year of the program we can better assess the need," she said.

Phase two of the initiative, Dean said, will aim at installing an additional 15 machines in schools willing to participate. She said no date has been set for the launch of the second phase, but she said with continued community support, she hopes by last quarter 2024.

The machines are refilled by the DGP on a monthly or as needed basis through the help of private companies, businesses and civic group partnerships such as Checkers Restaurant, Rotaract Club of Nassau Sunset, Kiwanis Club of South Eleuthera, The Empowerment Group, and Fidelity Bank Bahamas Ltd.

DGP was founded by Dean in August 2017 after its founder encountered an unemployed single mother who was distraught because she was unable to regularly provide her teen daughter's basic hygiene needs. Dean knew she had to make a difference in the mother's life and the lives of other mothers and daughters with a similar plight.

The organization's mission: to ensure that every child and adolescent female has access to essential hygiene products, and education to be empowered to make informed decisions regarding their social, psychological, biological, and economic well-being, and in turn make meaningful contributions to society.

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food-or-beverage-related industries. Through the program, experiential opportunities, both in and out of the classroom, will provide Blair with the practical skills to identify opportunities and solve the kinds of problems that she would face in launching a business.

For Blair, it will serve to enhance a number of businesses she launched as a teenager, one of which is ROMANGOES, her family's seasonal small mango juice business, which started with a bumper crop the family had from a tree in its backyard in 2021.

Their organic, freshly-squeezed 100 percent mango juice can be consumed as is, and also to make smoothies, jams, or jellies.

Blair is days from commencing studies at JWU, but said she is already looking ahead to obtaining a master's degree in food innovation and technology, with a view to returning home to showcase her talents in the field.

"Once I am done with school I plan to return home with the skills and knowledge that I would have learned abroad and put them to good use," said Blair. She is headed to JWU with

a strong and well-rounded education in culinary art, honed at The CALM (College of Tourism, Hospitality, Culinary Arts and Leisure Management) at UB.

"The classes I did at UB strengthened my culinary capabilities. Throughout my time at UB, I saw my growth in pricing meals, time management, organization, and food preparation. As a chef I have seen my speed in the kitchen increase as well as my problem-solving skills and just my overall confidence as a chef," she said.

Towards the end of her program, Blair was able to take advantage of an internship at Baha Mar's Grand Hyatt, which she said further cemented her well-rounded view of what her professional life could look like.

She was also pleased that the culinary arts program at UB exposed her to mentors and an extensive network of culinarians.

"It opened my eyes to the career opportunities available in the field," she said. "I got invaluable exposure to international culinary superstars like Chef Marcus Samuelsson [Ethiopian-born Swedish-American award-winning chef, restaurateur, author and the renowned chef behind many restaurants worldwide including Marcus at Baha Mar]; and Chef Ming

Tsai [American chef, restaurateur, and television personality], whom I have had the pleasure of meeting at Baha Mar's Culinary & Arts Festival in October 2022. It gave me an avenue to take in the culinary styles of our local chefs like chef Simeon Hall Jr. when I was able to work alongside him at his booth at Baha Mar's [at the 2023 festival].

During THE CALM's 2023 culinary week, she was also able to avail herself of the opportunity to speak with American Culinary Federation (ACF) certified chefs – Derek Spendlove, Alex Darvishi, Louis Perrotte and Stafford DeCambra, in terms of how she should view her career in the long term.

"UB expanded my culinary repertoire and provided me with so many opportunities in the culinary world. Above all, this program has allowed me to build relationships with various chefs, and I was able to tap into their knowledge about career advice as I begin to embark on my journey of entrepreneurship in culinary arts," she said.

Blair is beginning studies towards her bachelor's degree at JWU after having had to make the decision as a high school senior to accept a \$21,000 International Presidential Scholarship to JWU – renewable for up

to four years and still have to come up with a hefty portion of the tuition out of pocket – or enroll at UB as a J.S. Johnson Presidential Scholar and receive a full academic scholarship which also covers other UB-related expenses, including textbooks, uniforms, a knife kit and other kitchen accoutrements. As the name suggests, scholars have the benefit of the UB President as their patron and model. They are also able to study in another country.

The Tennessee-born teen chose the latter and to study at UB despite being approved for FAFSA and qualifying for other private scholarships available to military dependents; her father served two tours of duty during the war in Iraq.

"A life-changing conversation with Kandice Eldon, executive director of Corporate and Foundation Relations in the Division of Institutional Advancement, prompted me to dive into higher education at the University of The Bahamas. It's a decision I'll never regret," Blair previously told *The Nassau Guardian*. Sierra.

Eldon encouraged Blair who is also a noted children's book author, to apply for the J.S. Johnson-sponsored President's Scholars Programme (PSP) for outstanding students who

display leadership capability and potential.

As a J.S. Johnson Presidential Scholar, she had to maintain a minimum 3.5 grade point average (GPA), attend leadership workshops and seminars and participate in service-learning activities, among other requirements.

"UB offers many great advantages which, unfortunately, are overlooked by some teens in their rush to go straight off," said Blair.

In UB's associate's degree program, students learn the fundamentals of culinary arts, theory, and practice.

Blair has always shown an interest in culinary art. She has been cooking since the age of seven and her passion was sustained and grew over the years.

"I enjoyed trying new recipes, dishes and learning different techniques. As I matured, my enthusiasm and love for culinary arts grew," she previously told *The Nassau Guardian*.

The summer before her 11th-grade year, Blair's decision to pursue a degree at JWU was solidified after she got the opportunity to explore the world of cuisine at the university through a five-day cooking and learning program designed for high school students. It sealed the deal for the teen.

"After this trip, I discovered culinary arts was in-

deed the right profession for me. The career exploration program made me realize that culinary arts was my passion. Heading into my senior year of high school, this gave me peace of mind knowing what field I wanted to pursue," she had said.

The JWU student has said although she finds happiness in the kitchen, food sustainability is another major interest for her.

Blair's advice to anyone who wants to pursue studies in culinary art and who may not have all the funds to pursue university abroad, her advice is to consider studying at UB.

"Aside from the grant which covers the majority of tuition, the University of The Bahamas does have private scholarships for highfliers; these scholarships can cover up to full tuition, books, supplies and study abroad," she said. "I would recommend future and current students look at UB's website and see if they meet the requirements for any of their various scholarships and take advantage of them. I truly enjoyed my time at the university and hope students that want to study culinary who may not have the means to go abroad straight away complete their associates at UB and then transfer," she said.