

ST LUCIE COUNTY

'Got caught up in wrong crowd.' Florida teen turns life around, from defendant to youth ambassador



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PORT ST. LUCIE – Jovanie St vil said when he was chosen to represent Florida with two others as 2023 youth ambassadors for the state Department of Juvenile Justice, it was a speechless moment.

“I knew it was the beginning for me,” said St vil, 19. “Years ago, I was just in a position that was messed up, and I had to suffer consequences behind that.”

St vil, of Port St. Lucie, and two others – one originally from Fort Myers and another from the Miami-Dade County area – were selected as youth ambassadors, according to the Department of Juvenile Justice. There were 55 nominations to the program, department Communications Director Amanda Slama said.

The ambassadors are “exemplary youth who have turned around their lives for the better after contact with the juvenile justice system or who have participated in prevention programs for children at risk of entering the system,” Slama said via email. The program has been in existence since 2012.

Slama said a selection committee chooses the ambassadors, and typically they are “recognized because of their hard work, achievements, and for overcoming the challenges they have faced.”

In Department of Juvenile Justice documents, St vil was noted for his entrepreneurial spirit, improving his businesses’ networking and marketing capabilities, and his desire to become a motivational speaker with plans to help others with classes for getting started in the auto detailing business and mentoring them.

St vil said he was arrested in Port St. Lucie in October 2020 shortly after turning 17. He said he spent nine months at Palm Beach Youth Academy, a high-risk residential facility in West Palm Beach.

According to records, Port St. Lucie police arrested him on charges including robbery with a firearm, larceny-grand theft of a firearm and petty theft. The incident reportedly involved a number of people, at least one gun and a marijuana deal, according to statements in an affidavit.

“Things happen for a reason, you go into a situation, and you could either deal with the situation in a negative way, or you deal with it in a positive way,” St vil said. “I chose the positive route, I chose to be the positive reinforcement for other people.”

St vil, who said he’d attended Treasure Coast High School in Port St. Lucie, said he got his high school diploma while in Palm Beach Youth Academy, noting his parents, who are from Haiti, inspired him to get his diploma.

‘Everything just started going downhill’

St vil said his parents taught him right from wrong and to have a good moral compass. He said his parents worked long shifts, with his father in the restaurant field, and his mother in nursing assistant work.

He said his grandfather’s death in March 2020 took a toll. His grandparents, who died less than a year apart, took care of him while his parents worked.

“It all started, honestly, when my grandfather passed away,” he said. “Everything just started going downhill for me, mentally and physically.”

Through a sibling, St vil, who said he moved to Port St. Lucie as a child, fell in love with basketball, but got associated with the wrong people in junior year of high school.

“As young kids, sometimes we feel like we have to prove a point to other young kids, and you kind of get caught up in that wrong crowd,” St vil said. “I got caught up in the wrong crowd. Wrong place. Wrong timing.”

‘Game changer’

St vil got connected with Eckerd Connects Project Bridge, which an official there described as a “transitions program ”

“Our program works to assist youth that are coming out of the juvenile justice system, and they are reintegrating back into their home communities,” said Rebecca Bryan, Eckerd Connects community engagement supervisor. “When they've completed their time at their residential facility, that's where we come in.”

That can be through providing educational support, helping with work certifications and getting jobs.

St vil called Project Bridge a “game changer,” giving him reinforcement and allowing him to showcase his talents. It helped him start a car detailing business called Saint Shine Detailing, and also worked to help him with equipment to make T-shirts.

“Eckerd Connects actually were the role models and they actually kind of like molded my mind into thinking outside of the box and thinking from different perspectives,” St vil said. “Regardless of where I am in life, Eckerd Connects will be with me.”

Slama said the Youth Ambassadors are honored at a reception in Tallahassee, and get a certificate and “monetary award.”

St vil said when he was chosen, he wondered whether he was dreaming, and said he got to have a conversation with Florida First Lady Casey DeSantis.

“Shout out to her. She's a very good person,” St vil said. “We actually had a one-on-one time to speak more so about different things like, what are my goals, or where do I see myself years from now?”

Asked what advice he'd give other younger teens, St vil said to be aware of those around you.

“Always be around somebody who is a positive reinforcement to other people, and to you as well,” St vil said. “If there's no positive reinforcements, if there's no positivity in the picture, then you shouldn't be in that picture.”

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