



# THE VIRGIN ISLANDS DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

## Office of Public Relations

1834 Kongens Gade, Charlotte Amalie \* St. Thomas \* U.S. Virgin Islands 00802-6746  
Telephone: 340.774.0100 Ext. 8136 Fax: 340.774.1168  
340.773.1095 Ext. 7064 Fax: 340.773.4624

March 17, 2023

### **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

Contact: Cynthia T. Graham  
Director, Public Relations & Communications  
(340) 773-1095, Ext. 7064  
[cynthia.graham@vide.vi](mailto:cynthia.graham@vide.vi)

[www.vide.vi](http://www.vide.vi)

[www.facebook.com/usvi.vide](https://www.facebook.com/usvi.vide)

### **Abdel Bazzar is 2023 Territorial Spelling Bee Winner**

ST. THOMAS, USVI – Following 26 intense rounds of competition, Ricardo Richards Elementary School fifth grader Abdel Bazzar emerged as the winner of the 2023 Territorial Spelling Bee, now in its 50<sup>th</sup> year.

His winning word was “realm.”

“It feels good—really good,” Bazzar said of his win. “It definitely feels very good because apparently, only one other person has ever gone to the national spelling bee from my school.”

Other than competing virtually in his school’s Spelling Bee two years ago, this is the first year the 10-year-old participated in the full competition—placing in the top six at the district level and going all the way to claim the title of top speller in the Virgin Islands.

However, Bazzar said he knew he was up against tough contenders for the territorial competition.

“I was thinking that if Joseph, who won the St. Croix District Bee, and [Naitik] got out, I knew I had it in the bag,” he said. “But if they stayed in, I probably had a chance of losing because they were probably the best ones there.”

Bazzar said he prepared for the competition by meeting with his coach, Debora Heitzenrater, during the last 30 minutes of each school day, as well as having long study sessions at home.

“[My coach] would pick the hardest words on each page, and if I spelled them correctly, we would go to the next page,” he explained. “At home, we went through all the pages of words, we kept going and going until we finished all the pages.” Those pages, Bazzar explained, amounted to a total of about 9,000 words.

As for his hopes for taking the top spot at the Scripps National Spelling Bee in Washington, DC, this summer, he said, “I definitely need to keep studying and I’m very proud of myself.”

Nyeema Henderson, winner of the St. Thomas-St. John District Bee, placed second in the territorial competition; and Sinaia Steven, of Claude O. Markoe Elementary School, placed third.

This year marks the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Territorial Spelling Bee in the Virgin Islands, beginning in 1974, with only one of those years, 2021, the competition was not held due to the coronavirus pandemic.

“I wish you well,” Assistant Commissioner Victor Somme III told the participants. “We also want to recognize those that came before you, this is our fiftieth year of spelling bee in the Virgin Islands and we really thank our partner in this accomplishment, the Virgin Islands Daily News, they have been with us through thick and thin and they continue to support us as we send each Virgin Islands champion to the nation’s capital to participate in the national bee. This is going to be an exciting competition.”

The *Virgin Islands Daily News* has been the official sponsor of the Territorial Spelling Bee since 1985. The news organization will sponsor a six-night stay for two at the Gaylord National Resort and Convention Center in National Harbor, Md., during the Memorial Day weekend, as Bazzar represents the Virgin Islands in the Scripps National Spelling Bee.

Bazzar and all participants have received prize packages of electronics, gift certificates, books, and other gifts through the generous support of local and national sponsors.

Curriculum & Instruction Program Assistant Julie Deterville is the Territorial Spelling Bee coordinator.

###