

World travelers, adventurers deliver Earth-friendly message to V.I. youths

By SEAN McCOY
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ST. THOMAS — All people affect the environment, but with a little effort and ingenuity, they can reduce the negative impact they have on the natural world.

That message, along with some solutions for environmentally friendly living, came across loud and clear on Tuesday night. While the messengers spoke heavily accented English, they truly practiced what they preached.

Before they return to their native Switzerland in about 2007, they will have circled the globe by sailboat and climbed the highest mountain in each of the seven continents.

They will be propelled only by the wind and their own legs.

“We want to demonstrate that great achievements can be accomplished with only natural power,” said Sabine Schwörer, who, along with his wife, Dario, founded the TOPtoTOP club to raise awareness for global climate change.

The duo addressed a group of about 100 V.I. youths on Tuesday night at Fort Christian and will speak at schools during their weeklong stay.

Jean Braure, a 40-year Virgin Islands resident and captain, will join the TOPtoTOP Global Climate Expedition as it sails for Panama.

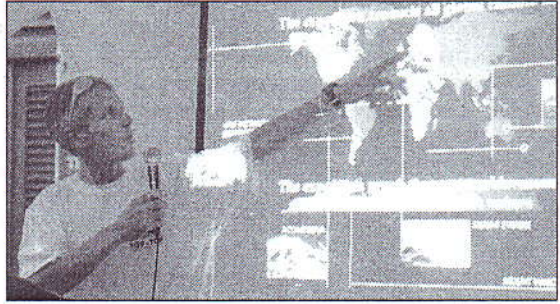
“We don’t focus on these things because we are so busy with day-to-day issues,” Sen. Louis Hill said in introducing the speakers. “You are traveling around the world with a purpose. You have to have a special heart and special constitution.”

From the rapt audience and their plentiful questions — which ranged from queries about global warming to technical curiosities about mountain climbing — it was clear that the children recognized the powerful example of human conviction represented by the club’s mission.

Many people have climbed the world’s highest mountains or even climbed the highest peak on each continent, but such an epic journey of sailing, bicycling, climbing and skiing never has been undertaken.

The TOPtoTOP expedition began with the climbing of Mont Blanc in June 2003. They then cycled to Croatia, where they set sail for the Canary Islands. From the Canary Islands, a trans-Atlantic journey brought the group to the Caribbean.

From St. Thomas, the expedition will sail for the Panama Canal, then travel north to Mt. McKinley or south to Aconcagua on the Argentinian-Chilean border. They then will sail to Antarctica and ski for a month to reach Mt. Vinson. From there, more sailing and cycling will bring them to Kosciusko in Australia, Mt. Everest in Nepal and Kilimanjaro in Africa.



Daily News Photo by SEAN McCOY

Sabine Schwörer explains the TOPtoTOP journey to youths at Fort Christian on Tuesday.

While the magnitude of such an adventure may seem crazy, it fits the Schwörers’ mission like a well-worn climbing shoe.

The journey will connect every climate zone on Earth, from the tropical Caribbean to frigid Antarctic mountain tops, while gathering techniques for Earth-friendly living from the people encountered along the way. And in sessions like Tuesday night’s, the adventurers will share these techniques across the globe.

“We are not fundamentalist,” Sabine Schwörer said. “We don’t say not to drive a car. We try to teach people to have a good relationship with nature. If we use nature, we have to give something back.”

As difficult as the 50,000 miles the duo will sail, 9,300 miles they will cycle and 759,000 feet they will climb may be, the club faces at least as many logistical and financial difficulties.

TOPtoTOP was started with a budget of just \$5,000 and a donated 50-foot Nivelt Joubert aluminum sloop. Gradually, it gained members who sailed, climbed or cycled for part of the trip and paid for their own food, often leaving some behind.

As the expedition’s fame grew, companies donated gear. But nine months into the journey, money still is a major hurdle.

“At the moment, we are eating rice and pasta a lot,” Sabine Schwörer said, explaining that he and Dario Schwörer need at least \$10,000 a year to cover basic expenses. Many countries have waived entry visa charges, and companies, such as Crown Bay Marina on St. Thomas, have donated goods and services.

“We can make it to Alaska, but we really need a sponsor for the next few months,” Sabine Schwörer said.

The Schwörers and any members who join them in the coming years have mountains of work ahead of them, but in a way, they already have accomplished their key message.

“Act now,” Sabine said.