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A Scientist Raps for Education

by Junious R. Stanton

Tyraine Ragsdale is a trained chemist and a former research scientist with a major pharmaceutical company. Now he is a full time rap artist and educator. In 1990 Ragsdale founded Grand Hank Productions and created the Educational Rap Lecture as an educational tool designed to spur interest in science and education amongst inner city youth using a medium they readily embrace, Rap Music. The Educational Rap Lecture is a full scale interactive educational presentation that incorporates motivational lectures, science information, history, hip beats and audience participation. Since its inception, the Educational Rap Lecture (ERL) has been seen by over 1.5 million students throughout the country.

Now Grand Hank Productions has formulated a curriculum development package which includes workbooks and audio cassettes covering science, African-American scientists, the eight parts of speech and educational motivation. They also offer student seminars which focus on goal setting, communications skills, assuming responsibility and taking control of your future.

Ragsdale is adamant about the potential of using rap as a means to motivate and educate young people. "The approach we wanted to take was to develop a program and a presentation that could instantaneously engage the students, that can grab their attention immediately. Once we have their attention, we'll deliver the message. As a follow up we tie in the educational products so the message is reinforced. Afterwards, the students have something tangible they can work on to stay on the right path and improve themselves. Also the educators have something they can take back to the classroom and continue to work on these exercises the students have been presented in the Rap Lecture presentation. We have a curriculum guide that does with the presentation. Since we're not able to present at all the schools the next best thing is to have a product that represents the shift of focus towards education."

Ragsdale is cognizant of the impact of gangsta rap and the negative influences of the genre. He feels it is incumbent upon responsible adults to take a bold approach to present education and positive values.

"The kids are going to listen to rap music whether we like it or not and also whether it's positive or negative. If they like that beat, they're going to listen to the music and after a while, they're going to listen to the words. If rap music has gotten our children so entrenched into this gangsta mystique, why hasn't someone come along and developed something to counter that?" Ragsdale asks incredulously.



Ragsdale Raps "Educationally"

Photo by JRS

"We take the same approach that has been taken to market gangsta rap. They took a guerrilla approach. They didn't ask anyone to play it. They didn't ask for anyone to listen to it, they just put it out. 'This is what I want to do and this is my life. This is what I'm livin', they just put it out. The problem coming from an educational angle is, everybody is looking for approval. They want the (school) administrators to approve it. That's not how it works. We have to take it to the street corners, we have to put it in these Mom and Pop stores. The same thing these gangsta rap artists and record companies are doing we have to do."

"I'm not asking for anyone to put their stamp of approval on this (ERL). We're doing this because it has to be done. If they don't play it on the radio that's okay. We've set up our beats so the kids like our music. The record stores have already committed to selling our records. So we don't need

radio but the radio will come. There will be a shift, (towards positive rap) it's coming. It's inevitable. The (gangsta) rap artists are bold in their approach and that's what we have to be. We're not asking people to sanction this. We've tested our products. We sold over 15,000 audio tapes of our latest tape without being promoted on the radio. This shows it can be done. We're getting ready to go on-line with the Internet. We're going to tie into the traditional and the non-traditional to get this product (ERL) to market. We're going to do it. It just takes the boldness and confidence that people are lacking in terms of doing what to be done to get the job done. This (rap) is a viable tool that can be used to motivate and educate our children but right now its being used to destroy them."

To schedule a presentation, a seminar or to purchase a curriculum guide, call (215) 724-5260.