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TEACHING COOL CHEMISTRY



Through fun and educational demonstrations, Tyraine Ragsdale, who goes by the moniker Grand Hank, sets out to establish the idea in the minds of the pupils that science is something that could add quality to their lives. — SUBMITTED PHOTO

Science guy appeals to kids with hip-hop

Robert Hightower
Tribune Staff Writer

Tyraine Ragsdale believes anyone can be a scientist.

This is the message he stresses to students across the city via his organization Grand Hank Productions Inc.

Through fun and educational demonstrations, Ragsdale, who goes by the moniker Grand Hank, sets out to establish the idea in the minds of the pupils that science is something that could add quality to their lives.

"We have shows that have educational content, but also work to the students' needs," he said.

To Ragsdale, the best way to capture the students' attention when dealing with complicated subjects is to filter the material down to an object in which they can identify. Being that hip-hop music is a genre largely appreciated by the audience to which he caters, Ragsdale interjects rap into his presentations.

"I thought if I could integrate something that I really like and something the students really like with the third sector which is education and get this to them, then my job is done," he said.

However, Ragsdale's scientific endeavors do not stop with tours of the schools.

Grand Hank Productions Inc. has collaborated with the School District of Philadelphia to form two television programs titled "Science Lab of Grand Hank" and "The Science of Philadelphia."

A native of the Mill Creek section of West Philadelphia, Ragsdale, said his meager surroundings helped to fuel his ambitions.

"I'm from the Mill Creek Housing Projects. I got most of my drive from being in that environment," he said. "It helped me in athletics, academics and in family relationship and values."

Known then throughout his neighborhood as a disc jockey that went by the name "Grandmaster Hank," he decided that he would have a stronger shot at accomplishing his goal by leaving the entertainment scene at that point and pursuing a college degree.

He enrolled at the University of Pittsburgh and decided to major in chemistry. Right away Ragsdale received a glimpse of the difficulties the science-based curriculum.

"I failed my first and second chemistry courses," he said.

His advisor tried to persuade him to go after another major.

"He told me that I did not have the mental attitude to be a scientist," he said. "He said that I was not scientifically capable. But I knew there was a scientist internally."

After buckling down in his studies and receiving tutelage, Ragsdale graduated as one of the only African-American scientists in his class.

After graduation, he landed a job at Johnson & Johnson as a research chemist.

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Grand Hank, seated right, with Ambra B. Hook, director of Science Education Philadelphia School District joined by Overbrook Elementary School fifth graders from, left, Seneca White, 11, Laydon Doelakeh, Malik Holliday, and Ronnie Carter, on Monday, to sign a poster depicting famous Black scientists. — ABDUL R. SULAYMAN/TRIBUNE CHIEF PHOTOGRAPHER

Grand Hank

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However, Ragsdale seemed to remember a promise that he made from his childhood.

"When I was growing up in the projects, I made a commitment that if I were ever in a

position to affect the lives of kids, I would," he said.

While working at the Fortune 500 Company, he started Grand Hank Productions Inc.

In one of his first jobs at The Franklin Institute he remembered the show was not going the way he had hoped. However, he found a conduit to the attention spans of the students.

"I was talking to a large audience and I was noticing that the kids were zoning out,"

he said. "Being that I was a DJ, I was able to read the crowd and I said I'm losing them. So I sang a rap song and the kids sang the rap and that was the epiphany. I realized that rap was powerful. I thought why don't they carry out scientific and educational concepts in rap songs."

Not long after, he was able to travel to more schools. It came to the point where Ragsdale was making as much money with the shows as he did his day job.

The School District of Philadelphia caught wind of Ragsdale's organization and a partnership was formed.

Ambra Hook, who serves as the School Board's Director of Science, K-12, said she supported Ragsdale to pique the interest of the students.

"We're getting kids excited about science, we are targeting middle school kids to get them

excited and we then to start thinking about various careers in science," she said.

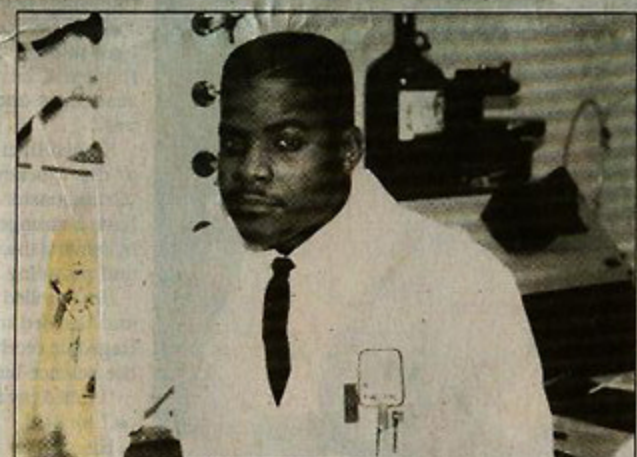
Grand Hank Productions Inc.'s next goal is product development.

"We are going to be developing products for the educational sector and the consumer section so that you can do science at home," Ragsdale said. "These are live hand-on experi-

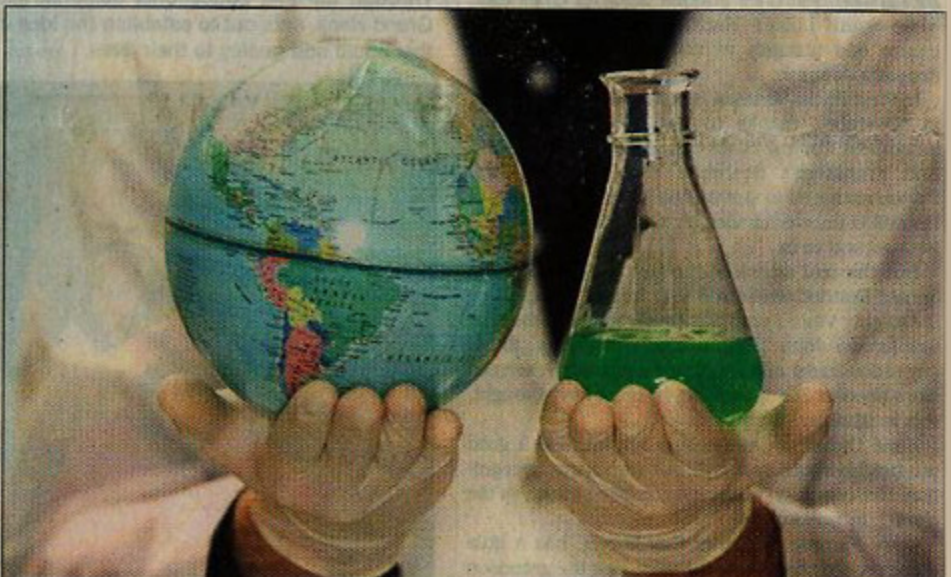
ment that will come in a kit."

There are also books and a DVD series the Grand Hank Productions Inc. has released. The company also has its own state-of-the-art studio located at 7153 Sprague St.

For more information and show times of television broadcasts, visit www.grandhank.com or e-mail grandhank@aol.com or call (215) 247-1109.



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