

Rapper uses music to spark students' interest in science

By Denise Lavoie
Associated Press

FAIRFIELD — In the laboratory, Tyraine Ragsdale is a mild-mannered research chemist.

But on stage, he is "Grand Hank," a hip singer who uses rap music to teach kids about science.

The force that drives students away from science is that they don't think scientists are normal people," Ragsdale said yesterday after performing for about 600 middle school students from Bridgeport. "But when they see me, they say, 'Hey, this guy is cool. Maybe I can give science a try.'"

Ragsdale, 29, began rapping his science message to children about five years ago after landing a job as a research chemist with the R.W. Johnson Pharmaceutical Research Institute in Spring House, Pa., a division of Johnson & Johnson.

He had just graduated from the University of Pittsburgh with a bachelor's degree in chemistry and wanted to combine his knowledge of science with his love of music.

"I had worked as a disc jockey all through high school and college and I understood that rap music was a powerful vehicle — in terms of the way it reaches children," he said.

"Rap music is what all students love, and I thought, why not use this as a tool to promote education?"

In his hour-long concert at Sacred Heart University, Ragsdale used rap music with his own lyrics to spark interest in education, particularly science, a subject he acknowledged is not always the most popular among students.

"Anybody can be — a sci-en-tist," he repeated over and over again in the only lyrics to a song aimed at getting students to think about being scientists.

"But just like a train needs a track to run, you need your ed-u-ca-tion. School can do for you what it did for me," he rapped during a song that told the story of his own life.

He devoted another song to African-American inventors and scientists, rapping out the names, discoveries and inventions of people like Garrett Morgan (the traffic light) and Charles Drew (blood plasma).

The students, who were bused to Sacred Heart from three middle schools in Bridgeport, seemed to enjoy the music and understand the message.

"The message is, if you want to be somebody, you have to do your best," said Juan Forero, an 8th grader at Winthrop Middle School.

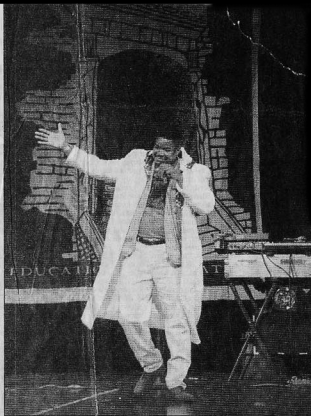
Ragsdale's appearance was sponsored by Research! America, a nonprofit membership group that promotes medical research, and Connecticut United for Research Excellence, a biomedical research advocacy organization.

"If, at the very least, we could impart the idea that science isn't boring, that would be the result we're looking for," said Stephen Tyson, the New York coordinator for Research! America, based in Alexandria, Va.

"Science is not boring, it's exciting. That's the message," Tyson said.

Ragsdale, who has performed for more than 100,000 students at schools along the East Coast, said he plans to leave his job as a chemist at R.W. Johnson to bring his science program to schools full time.

"The goal is to increase the enrollment of students and to expose them to medicine and science," he said. "It's a tremendous pleasure in seeing students become interested, motivated and turned on to science."



Research chemist and rapper Tyraine 'Grand Hank' Ragsdale wears a sequined lab coat as he performs at Sacred Heart University in Fairfield yesterday before about 600 middle school students. Ragsdale uses rap music to teach kids about science.