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Journal photo by Larry Cusack

Tyrairie Ragsdale (aka Grand Hank) performs yesterday at Snyder High School in a program aimed at educating students on the accomplishments of black scientists and inventors.

## Selling careers in science

### Grand Hank raps home the message

By Beth Kissinger  
Journal staff writer

Lights flashed, the sound mixer zapped and the rapper Grand Hank ripped across the stage at Snyder High School in Jersey City.

More than 100 students filled the school's auditorium yesterday and howled right on beat. But they knew Grand Hank was no regular gangsta rapper.

He donned a white lab coat — lined with shiny green sash — and revealed himself as Tyrairie Ragsdale, a chemist and scientific rapper.

"Knowledge is power — but when you don't learn — you can burn," he rapped.

Ragsdale, of Philadelphia, a former chemist with Johnson & Johnson, was just one of the real-life scientists students met yesterday to talk about science careers.

The New Jersey Association for Biomedical Research, a non-profit group based in Elizabeth, sponsored the event as part of its new partnership with Snyder. Students in the school's Health Professions Magnet Program attended with students from Academic High School and the Bridges Program.

Snyder entered the partnership to expose its students to the variety of science careers and the people working in them, and perhaps link them to internships, said Gerry Nocia, Snyder's job placement director.

Speakers included Ophelia Gona, an anatomy professor at the University of Medicine and Dentistry in Newark, and Joseph Ruffin, an animal care supervisor with Schering Plough.

But Grand Hank, whose company Grand Hank Productions now informs students about science and education careers, may be best able to reach students and shatter stereotypes about who a scientist is, said Jane Mackta, the association's executive director.

"The image of the scientist is a nerdy person with a pocket liner who doesn't talk the language of the rest of the people," she said.

With a few giant flashcards and a booming rap beat, the articulate chemist spoke the language of rappers and scientists.

Almost every hand shot up when he asked how many students want to attend college. But he warned that everything changes in college, that they must master the English language to be successful, that he himself took jobs as a DJ and construction worker before earning his chemistry degree from the University of Pittsburgh.

He then held up names of African-American scientists and inventors on giant flashcards: Elijah McCoy; Charles Drew; Louis Latimer; Benjamin Banneker; Henry Blair and Garrett Morgan.

Students knew only Morgan, who invented the stoplight and gas mask.

So Grand Hank asked student volunteers to dance as he rapped about the achievements of McCoy — the inventor of self-lubrication for machines; Drew — discoverer of blood plasma; Latimer — maker of electric lamp filaments, and Blair — maker of the ticking clock. "In history books it's not even mentioned," he rapped.

Kareem Grace, 14, summed up what he learned with the same quick sound bites of a rapper. "Stay in school, don't do drugs," he said.

But even doing these things won't necessarily lead to success, warned Gona. Gona, who is African-American, recalled how she grew up in the segregated South, made great grades but still never thought about what she wanted to be.

"I didn't know anything," even after college, she said.

Few African-Americans were going on for advanced degrees, so Gona earned a PhD in biology. She sadly told the students that UMDNJ hasn't hired an African-American PhD in 17 years.

She warned these aspiring doctors and biochemists that they'll be competing with students from top high schools and that they must start preparing now. Her suggestions: learn five new vocabulary words a day and study at least two hours a night.