

"INNOVATORS OF THE POSITIVE NEWS FORMAT"

Grand Hank And The Science of Philadelphia Interests Young Blacks In Science Curriculum

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Five years ago *Science World* (Teacher's Edition) featured a young African American Chemist who rapped about Science. Today, you can see the same man in *The Science of Philadelphia* Television Series. This live and interactive television series is presented in collaboration with the School District of Philadelphia. The show is designed to increase the interest and enrollment of students in the areas of science and technology by presenting them in ways that are exciting and inspirational. Co Hosted by Grand Hank (Tyraine Ragsdale) and Ambra Hook, *The Science of Philadelphia* reaches an estimated 300,000 students, parents and teachers per week via Wade, Comcast and Greater Media Networks.

Drawing upon the rich cultural heritage of so many students in the Philadelphia Public School System and so many similar ones in the United States, Grand Hank has demonstrated that the assertion about Blacks not being interested in Science and Technology is without foundation. Tyraine Ragsdale grew up as an integral part of Philadelphia's Hip Hop Generation. He realized that this postmodern African American cultural form was looplinked to an old, old tradition of African griots (on the continent and in the United States). It was the well known Disc Jockey Douglas' Jocko Henderson who pioneered in demonstrating the efficacy of Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture to transmit simple and complex ideas. One year after he released a prototype of what became known as a rap record (released in April, 1979 a few months before the Sugarhill Gang) Jocko launched a revolutionary project called "Get Ready." Realizing that if young people could learn the words of rap songs with remarkable speed and ease, there was no reason rap could not be used to teach Math, Science, English, History, Vocational Education, Urban Geography and other courses. Jocko's project attracted national and international media attention and they were able to convince many School Districts to use this groundbreaking core curriculum.

Grows Up In Mill Creek Housing Projects

Interestingly, Philadelphia is the city where two of the most successful educational programs utilizing Rap Music had its birth. A decade after Jocko launched the Rap Resource Project, Tyraine Ragsdale initiated an exciting and highly imaginative way of reaching many young people who were either turned off, dropping out or being pushed out of public schools. In an exclusive interview with Ragsdale we learned more about the genesis of this novel project, as well as the growth and development of a young Black scientist. Grand Hank explains, "I grew up in West Philly. Mill Creek Housing Projects. 46th Street. I had made a commitment to myself if I was ever in a position to help people, I would. So I got out of high school and went to college. I was accepted at the University of Pittsburgh. I chose Chemistry because my father had shared something with me earlier. He said a lot of careers that are technical Black people tend to shy away from because of difficulty or because of the stories they've heard. I said, 'Let's give it a shot.'"

My Father Told Me, "You Can't Quit!"

Continuing his personal narrative, Ragsdale says, "I took the first couple course in Chemistry, failed them and I realized that Chemistry wasn't the problem. It was my technique of studying and how I was applying myself. I went back, resharpened by technique and mastered it. I graduated. Got a degree in Chemistry." Reflecting on what happened when he sought help from his counselor after having problems with several courses, he notes, "When I spoke to the counselor assigned to me he told me that based on my grades I didn't have the aptitude to be a scientist. I told him that he didn't know me... He told me maybe I should consider going into the business. I said, 'I want to be a chemist.' And from that day I dismissed him as my Advisor and I started advising myself I ran into some challenges that I couldn't get across. I was ready to just quit everything and just collapse. I had studied as hard as I could my sophomore year, and I just didn't do well. My father told me, 'You can't quit. There are people in this neighborhood that are watching you. There kids are on drugs. There kids are not doing well. They are hoping that somebody from this neighborhood will do something good so they can be proud. That put things in perspective. 'If you quit what are you going to do Come back and work for me.'"

Tyraine Ragsdale is a 1988 graduate of the University of Pittsburgh with a Bachelor's Degree in Chemistry. He chose the field of chemistry because of his interest in researching and developing new methods to cure physical illnesses. His scientific background has greatly aided him in his current career activities. Ragsdale currently serves as consultant to the National Organization for the Professional Advancement of Black Chemists and Chemical Engineers and is on the Planning Committee for the United Negro College Fund.

If We Can Party We Can Study

The story of how he overcame the earlier challenges at the University of Pittsburgh and went on to become a Research Chemist with the Robert W Johnson Pharmaceutical Research Institute of Johnson & Johnson is one worthy of retelling. Ragsdale organized several other African American students into the *Punk Funk Nation Study and Party Aggregation*. He recalls, "We called it Grand Hank and The Punk Funk Nation. I would be the DJ and I would have all of these people coming to the party. I said, 'We can do this.' We all used to study together. We used to go to the parties and after the parties we would go up to the study hall. I said to them, 'If we can party. We can study. We used to study from 11 at night to 7 AM and then we would sneak into the cafeteria for breakfast. That was our treat. We put in long hours.' Coming from a family with eight people in it and parents with a strong work ethic This background of experiences served Tyraine well.

Ragsdale says, when I got out of college I was highly recruited. I took a job with Johnson and Johnson as a pharmaceutical chemist. I was in the area called Spectroscopy (the study and analysis of chemicals and how they interact with each other). After several years of working at R.W. Johnson Pharmaceutical Research Institute Ragsdale came to a crossroad. His desire to be an entrepreneur and to combine his love for DJ-ing in Hip Hop with his love for the natural and physical sciences, outweigh the work as a pharmaceutical chemist. This led him to establish Grand Hank Productions Inc. He recalls, "My love for DJ-ing goes way back. DJ-ing at parties put me through college. I started out DJ-ing at Hamilton Middle School. My older brother, Andre, was into DJ-ing. We used to battle other DJs and all that. Because of

the area that I grew up in we didn't always get the recognition that some of the bigger names got. Because when you are in the projects, nobody is coming to the projects. The ones out that I admired at the time were Disco Rat, Bobby Dance and Captain Boogie."

Grand Hank Productions, Inc. Goes To School

Founded in 1990, Grand Hank Productions, Inc. had as its defining mission "to develop and implement educational initiatives to help students understand the importance of getting an education." Now he presents students with lessons and experiments developed around the National Standards for Science Education.

Interesting Young People In Learning

What enables Grand Hank Productions to reach students often turned off by current offerings in the classroom? Ragsdale explains, "My rapport with the students in the class is our connection with Hip Hop Music. When we do our tour we come on stage spinning the latest rap records. They say, 'Oh My God, it's hip. Being a DJ I know right records can move any crowd, black, white, or chinese. Once you get them to listen we say now we want you to hear the message we have brought you.' They listen and say, 'these guys must be hip.. The music they got is cool, they must be cool.' Moving them along is Grand Hank.

Celebrate for Knowledge: Essay Contest

Not only is Grand Hank reaching Philadelphia students through ERL (Educational Rap Lecture) but the Coca Cola Bottling Company recently kicked off its second annual "Celebrate The Knowledge" Essay contest at the Philadelphia Education Fund's College Access Center. On hand to announce details about this year's contest were Philadelphia Coca-Cola Bottling Company executives, media sponsor Power 99 FM and Philadelphia high school juniors and seniors. The contest ends on May 5, 2000 (the date must be postmarked on all entries) Students only

have to submit a 500 word essay based on these topics: a) Who do you think is the greatest person from the last century and why? b) What type of music is speaking for your generation and why? c) If you had an opportunity to start your own business, what type of business would you create?

Whether it is "Celebrate the Knowledge" or "Grand Hank Productions The Science Behind The Music, Coca Cola and Grand Hank should do coop projects in 2000. A