



'Grand Hank' of Glenside: a man on a mission



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Grand Hank Productions is an educational company that promotes larger-than-life STEM events for youth nationwide.

“Grand Hank,” aka Tyraine Ragsdale, is a 30-year resident of Glenside with a big-picture mission.

The former television host was a recent headliner for the biggest stage in science today—the biannual [USA Science and Engineering Festival](#)—and the Grand Hank STEM Center is currently under renovation at a location near La Salle University.

Early Life

Tyraine was raised by a single mother of eight in the Mill Creek housing projects of West Philly.

He made an early decision to use his mind and his work ethic to change his circumstances.

“To get out of that environment, I decided that education would be my ticket as a tool to leverage myself to a higher and better place. I moved myself, with the help of my community, to a position where I was identified in sixth grade as being mentally gifted. They thought I had potential. When I graduated elementary school, I was moved to an academic school for

"I had no interest in going to college as a first-generation student," he said. "A gentleman who was one year ahead of me was dating a girl in my grade. We were all friends. He went to the University of Pittsburgh. He told me how great it was there, and that this should be my next move."

Tyraine headed to Pittsburgh without ever having seen the campus.

"I saw the terror of chemistry for freshmen, but I gave it a shot. I had to repeat a few courses. And that's what kids need to know: there are a lot of little steps in order to get that degree," he said. "I want kids to see the fight in me. You have to go to war to become what you want to become. That's my message."

Early Career

The chemistry major soon found his work on the front page of the Pittsburgh Gazette. Fast-forward a few years, he landed his first job with Johnson & Johnson running a chromatography separations laboratory, meticulously isolating and purifying drug compounds with over 60 scientists.

Fast-forward a few more years, and Tyraine decided it was time to give back.

"I had decided early on that I was going to help people. I was successful in the laboratory, and then a bolt of lightning came down: You're here. Now what? How can I give back? I wanted to show children that science is worth pursuing, that it's a beautiful thing that affects all of our lives," he said.

The Genesis of "Grand Hank"

"Grand Hank," a conceptual stage name, was born out of an invitation to lecture at [The Franklin Institute](#) in 1989.

"I told them I wouldn't come unless there were African-American kids in the audience," he said. "I helped them make that arrangement. When speaking to the audience, I saw the kids were side-talking, so I started rapping. Suddenly I had full attention. That was my epiphany: to use music to teach science. I began to develop programs and songs that had teaching concepts in them."





After the on-stage epiphany, he founded Grand Hank Productions, which develops television programs, products, and live events to increase student interest in education.

"I was doing educational rap shows. I would rap a little bit, then I would lecture. I tried to inspire them to do well in school!"

The Philadelphia School District and Grand Hank Productions, Inc. co-created a science education television show called *The Science of Philadelphia*, which aired from 1994 to 2011. The show became a hit with audiences.

[The Science of Philadelphia](#), an education-centric television show, approached Tyrae with an idea, and from 1994 to 2009 it ran. The appointment dovetailed into his next ventures: a second television show, "The Science Lab of Grand Hank," which debuted in 1996, and The Science Lab of Grand Hank Tour, which debuted in the late 2000s.

"We co-promoted it on the radio station where each week before the show aired I would go on air at the station and put a science question out to be answered by the listening audience. The phone lines were always lit up with folks calling in trying to answer the question. Then, I started receiving calls from schools to come and do live science shows. We combined the rap show with the science show and created "The Science Lab of Grand Hank and subsequently,



Tyraine speaking during a Science Lab of Grand Hank Tour event

Tyraine is something of a maven: a person who knows what other people want before they do.

"I started in 1989 when nobody was even thinking about STEM the way it's talked about today. I wanted to get to a national audience and began receiving invitations to present at major conferences by organizations like the National Science Teachers Association (NSTA)," he said. "The rooms were always packed, and I would always ask them for bigger rooms."

"We partnered with the NSTA and did a live science event for students at their national conference in New Orleans and it blew up. I was then invited to be the keynote speaker for the NSTA's conference several years later. I was the first African American speaker to give the keynote address to the entire organization. As a result, Shell Oil, DuPont Corporation, and The American Petroleum Institute all came on the scene."

A portion of the tour's revenue was parlayed to acquire a city block of real estate at the foot of La Salle University. The space is currently under renovation and once completed will be named the Grand Hank STEM Center. The center will provide hands-on STEM exposure to students.



like to join us and complete this vision to educate and elevate our kids," he said. "As someone who has been through the educational system from a disadvantaged environment, I can tell students that education is worth pursuing. This is what these children need to see. You can't tell them, you have to show them. We have something for everyone. That's our mission."

His work has taken him as far as South Africa, where he and his team led a 14-city tour. The outfit went into villages and provinces to provide professional development for teachers and students to master science with materials readily available to them.

"There was a lot of loss of interest in school and learning during the pandemic," he said. "Grand Hank is the catalyst to jump-start learning again. It's a chemical reaction that we want to spread virally. Currently, we fill arenas, but nobody has ever filled up a stadium for learning. That's the mission of Grand Hank Productions, Inc."

What's Next?

Grand Hank has partnered with the Philadelphia Metropolitan Opera House to produce a mega-STEM event in December. *Glenside Local* will provide details of the event soon.

If you'd like to watch Grand Hank in action, you can check out [this video](#) from the USA Science and Engineering Festival. For more on Grand Hank Productions, you can visit their [website](#). To learn about Grand Hank's 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, The Knowledge Factory, Inc., you can click [here](#).

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