

The Learning Key

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Grand Hank helps youth

By Leonte Dunbar
Special to the Tribune

"We don't go there to put on a show, but if you get a show out of it, that's O.K. too," proclaims 28-year-old rapper Tyraine Ragsdale, a.k.a. Grand Hank of his innovative and motivational performances. Of course, entertaining his audience is a priority, but, he says the bottom line is to build self esteem by promoting education, science and Black history. Well . . . that's not so unusual. Groups like Arrested Development and Public Enemy have been known to drop a little knowledge here and there. But, can rap be an available educational tool? Grand Hank thinks so. Armed with a degree in chemistry from the University of Pittsburgh, he is on a mission to turn this hypothesis into fact.

Employed as a research chemist

for Robert Wood Johnson Pharmaceutical Research Institute (a Johnson and Johnson Company), Ragsdale explains. "One day I stopped to look behind me and didn't see anyone else. That was frightening." He was determined to find a way to help others reach his level of success. He knew that many youth were deterred from careers in science because of preconceived notions the scientists were nerds. Others did not see scientific careers as an option for non-whites. He was convinced that African-American youth do not pursue higher levels of education because doctors, lawyers and scientists are not part of their everyday realities. There are many Black role models, but few existing mediums to channel information. As a young Black chemist his mission was to absorb

all existing information of African-American scientist and to be that channel. The question was . . . How?

Rap is and integral and significant part of our culture. Youth eat, drink and sleep rap. "When you rap it sticks," says Ragsdale. "If some physics is put in it, a person may find they've learned a concept he/she previously thought difficult to grasp."

While attending University City High School, Ragsdale had fun and made money on the weekends spinnin' records as a deejay. Moving to college, this skill transferred into a small entrepreneurial venture which became Grand Hank Productions Inc. He credits science for providing the critical thinking skills that helped him start his business. "I had all the ingredients," Ragsdale says, "I was a scientist who had a background in music." This revelation was the foundation for the Educational Rap Lecture.

Check it out . . .

Grand Hank steps to the mic inconspicuously, donned as a typical hip-hop artist, baseball cap, jeans, et al. The three-man show which includes Grand Hank; D.J., Derrick Barnett; and choreographer, Bill Keith, set the tone for a sho-nuff jam session. To an overwhelming response Grand Hank shouts, "Pump it up! Knowledge is Power!" Then he drops a rhyme.

Bust this . . .

When you think electric current

The brother had no fear

So let's acknowledge the designs of

Louis Latimer

Like when the sun goes down

And it turns night

He harvested electric current

And made it give off light

The formula for the electric

lamp

was his invention

Check the history books

And its not even mentioned

He brought us from candles

to electric light

Louis Latimer

Gets people all uptight

From the seats of their school

auditorium the crowd jumps up

screening. "Hey, Ho! Hey, Ho!

Mission accomplished. Their attention

is grabbed. How does he know

his audience is listening to his message

and not jammin' to a slamin' beat.

Enthusiastic listeners reassure him

by memorizing lyrics on the spot.

If he's not convinced the message is heard,

he busts the same rhyme again.

What's all the hype about?

The Educational Rap Lecture

(ERL) is, "a synthesis of experiences

of a scientist and a hip-hop deejay,"

says Ragsdale. "Its desire is to educate,

inspire and positively influence urban youth."

Consisting of three parts, the ERL begins with

a rap presentation (concert), a series

of songs with lyrics that focus on the importance

of science and education. The concert is

followed by an interactive lecture,

reinforcing the educational themes discussed

in the songs. Concluding the lecture is an open forum

to discuss issues concerning today's youth.

The ERL is for everyone, but specifically

"those on the border, right on the fence, who can do

well, but don't know how," says Ragsdale.

Many youth do not see the benefit of school,

others are just difficult to reach. In an attempt

to reach everyone, the ERL combines visual,

auditory and kinesthetic representational systems.

Each child learns differently, the ERL

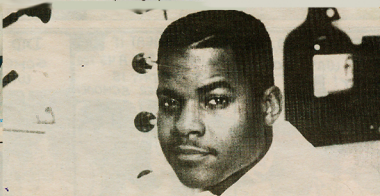
allows its audience to see, hear and feel the message.

When people see something that is different,

they are usually critical, Ragsdale says the ERL



Grand Hank raps to a group of students.



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was designed with the intent to put people at ease. Even students are skeptical at first. "They think that because I'm from around the way that I can't be educated," says Ragsdale. "But we put those myths to rest in the first five minutes. You can't teach them anything if you don't have their attention. And the way to get their attention is to make them think."

Who can fight?

Everyone responds . . .

"What would happen in a world where you had to fight but couldn't use your hands?"

No answer . . .

"Then we drop a beat on them."

The answer . . . use your knowledge

Knowledge is power.

By this point in the presentation Grand Hank has undergone complete metamorphosis. Making subtle changes in his attire (the baseball cap has disappeared and a white lab coat covers his T-shirt) the rapper takes on the appearance of a scientist. The impact of this symbolic changed is realized by the audience. Dancing and shouting the names of their ancestors — Louis Latimer, Granville Woods, Elijah McCoy — names some of them had never heard before, helped them see that science could in fact be a career option.

The message is traveling. "It has been estimated that the ERL has reached more than 100,000 people. Its overwhelming response has triggered numerous presentations at schools and colleges throughout Philadelphia and the East Coast. Ragsdale has appeared on news and public affairs programs at the Black Expo in Philadelphia, New York and Washington D.C. The lecture has also been presented at the Black family Reunion and the Martin Luther King Youth Assembly sponsored by the office of Sen. Harris Wofford.

Grand Hank Productions Inc. is enjoying steady and continuous growth. It has developed into a multimedia facility that develops, produces, manufactures and markets its own products which include posters, T-shirts, audio and video cassettes. GHPI's first album is titled "Education of a Nation." In order to offset the cost of the presentation GHPI is currently seeking corporate sponsorship.

Ragsdale feels the time is now for the ERL. He believes he has reached a level where he has perspective but is still young enough to understand the concerns and struggles of today's youth. "I really enjoy what I'm doing," he says. Because of the efforts of Ragsdale and people like him, youth are

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learning and being exposed to information the otherwise would not. But, they are just the messengers, the bottom line, Ragsdale concludes, "once you take responsibility for you actions and determine that it is you who's in control of your destiny, success is imminent."

GHPI is currently scheduled ERL presentations for the 1993 school season. For more information contact Tyraine Ragsdale 724-5260.

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