

Former Millcreek resident now a hip-hopping chemist

Tyraine Ragsdale says he had plans to become a Major League Baseball player when he left PHA's old Mill Creek development for the University of Pittsburgh in 1983. Instead, he ended up becoming a chemist with Johnson & Johnson on the corporate fast track with a corner office. He'd bring friends from Mill Creek (now rebuilt and called Lucien E. Blackwell Homes) to his office in suburban Spring House to show them that "this is what you can do."

Ragsdale, however, had a higher calling: to start his own business and give back to the community. His boss was livid. After all, J & J had created a position for him when none existed, and he was a rising star in the company. But for Tyraine, it was "time for me to go to the next level" after five years on "the best job anybody could ever want."

"I had made a commitment that I had never told anyone about," he says. "I said if ever I'm in a position to give back, then I would do it."

While he was still working at Johnson and Johnson, Kelly Woodling of the Franklin Institute asked Ragsdale to help with a visiting scientist program that was getting started. Woodling was impressed with Ragsdale's credentials and felt he would be ideal for a program designed to interest young people in science and careers in science. Ragsdale agreed and took on the Saturday program.

During one of his presentations, Tyraine says he experienced "an epiphany moment." He was talking to 100 middle school students, and he could see he was losing their interest. The former college DJ known as Grandmaster Hank "kicked a rap song," and the educational rap lecture was born.

Ragsdale's reputation spread, and he kept getting invited to various locations across the country to talk to young people about staying in school, getting an education, and getting ahead with a satisfying career in science. He realized that "this rap thing could be big. This could be a business."



"I'm just like you," Grand Hank tells his students as he demonstrates the wonders of chemistry.



Grand Hank's wide-eyed students are fascinated by science.

Grand Hank Productions, Incorporated, was born in 1989. Tyraine says the business just took off.

"I would be traveling to other cities at night, flying back during the day, going to work. I'd use all my vacation up, use all my sick time. I'd use everything I could get my hands on and my business was just growing," he says.

Eventually, the money from his company matched the salary he was making at Johnson & Johnson, where he still worked. He was torn between getting a doctorate in chemistry and growing his company. Ragsdale, who had learned all he could about the corporate world and business while at J & J, prayed on it. He received his answer in the middle of the night and went on to invest his life in his business.

"If you want to be the smartest scientist in the world, then you need a PhD," he says. "But if you

want to be in business, then you need to go and do business."

Ragsdale left J & J in 1994, just five years after he started to pursue his dream. He recalls that a company secretary told him when he first started that he would not be there long because he had something inside that "these walls cannot hold." The company, by the way, was willing to let him work just three days a week so he could pursue his business interests!

Today, The Science Lab of Grand Hank Television Series and 11 other programs are produced by Grand Hank Productions located in Mount Airy. An estimated 3.5 million people in 15 states, including Pennsylvania, have used them.

Tyraine Ragsdale appreciates the time he spent growing up at Mill Creek. He says living there helped him develop skill sets that other people didn't have to compete and survive. And he never thought of himself as poor. Even though the neighborhood has changed

dramatically, Ragsdale still has friends there.

"Grand Hank" spends his time today urging young people to

excel at whatever they choose to do, pointing to Africans and African-Americans who were great scientists, builders and inventors without some of the advantages we have today. Struggling, Tyraine says, is part of the path to success. He points to himself saying, "I'm just like you. Remember, I came from these projects,

"I said if ever I'm in a position to give back, then I would do it."
Grand Hank