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BY RANDY LOBASSO - PHOTOS BY J.J. BLACKWELL



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Hip-hop dancers teach kids a civil rights lesson

A successful Kickstarter campaign means Hip Hop Fundamentals finally gets to bring its history-by-music program to underfunded Philly schools.

By Randy LoBasso

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Photo by J.R. Blackwell

It's a late Sunday morning in Clark Park, and the basketball court at 44th and Chester is split amongst two groups. About 10 people play a half-court game of hoops at one end. A mess of 20-somethings and high school students occupy the other, a soundtrack of James Brown's "Mind Power" stinging the pavement from an iPod plugged into a 12-inch guitar amp, practicing dance moves.

Then Mark "Metal" Wong turns on a small, black boombox and begins circling through the park. "Free hip-hop show!" he tells the families watching their children climb the monkey bars and toss footballs in the small, open-grassed valley. The same message has already been posted on signs all around the park, lining Baltimore Avenue's phone poles and community bulletin boards: a "Free Hip Hop Dance Show," the signs promise, will teach "the history of civil rights" through "Education! Music! Dancing! Fun!"

Within 20 minutes, the hipster parent demographic of West Philadelphia has descended upon the grass and benches lining the pavement. There's a crowd. Basketball continues on half the court, but the small group of dancers, who call themselves Hip Hop Fundamentals, start breakdancing to an original remix of Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech to get the audience warmed up.

"Clark Park, what time is it?" Wong asks the swelling assemblage. The crowd's already been told the response point: "Showtime!"

A young man decked out professorially, in a full gray suit and bowtie, takes center stage. "Dr. King fought for his people through nonviolent direct action," he proclaims. "The founders of hip-hop fought for their free expression through art, culture, expression and dance. The truth is, hip-hop is one of the many legacies of the civil-rights movement."

This is Aaron Troisi, former lead organizer at the community group Fight for Philly and a former member of Occupy Philadelphia. He's got a bachelor's degree in African-American studies from Penn State and is now studying to be a social studies teacher. In this show, titled "Civil Rights Movements"—which he helped Hip Hop Fundamentals develop last winter—he's playing Professor Peabody, the narrator, teaching a condensed version of mid-20th-century American civil rights history, meant for elementary school students.



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Here's what the civil rights movement and hip-hop have in common, he tells the audience: young people, peace, love, unity and respect. By the end of the performance, you've got to hand it to them: Everyone's participated, the audience has formed a dance circle around the performers, and many are whipping out their phones to donate to the group's crowdsourcing campaign on Kickstarter.

The point was to make learning fun. And by George, they did it. It's the sort of creative education success story Philadelphia doesn't see enough of.

The company has traveled the nation over the past two years, bringing their shows school-to-school from Maine to California; their repertoire includes not just "Civil Rights Movements," but also an anti-bullying show and a "Laws of Physics" show. But until just this month, one place where they hadn't been able to reach students in schools was right here at home, in Philly. Because the schools simply couldn't find any money to hire them.

After this year's school budget meltdown, leaving the district woefully short of state funds, arts and sports programs have been decimated at many local public schools. And when the academic year ended last week, it wasn't just the end of the semester: It marked the permanent closing of 23 schools around the city, and, at least for now, the laying off of another 3,783 employees—including 676 teachers, 283 counselors, 127 assistant principals and 1,202 noontime aides.

Against that grim backdrop, it seems even more valuable to bring students a program like Hip Hop Fundamentals, which strives to enrich learning for kids who aren't getting art, music or dance in their daily routine. That's why Wong, Troisi and their crew turned to Kickstarter.

A word-of-mouth fundraising campaign this spring garnered some corporate backing, and they raised \$10,000 from supporters to bring their show to 10 low-performing, impoverished Philly schools. Local entrepreneur Steve Graham of Silverback B-Boy Events, a Philadelphia-area organization that sponsors and supports local hip-hop artists, agreed to match each dollar the crew raised up to \$5,000, and they exceeded their goal with a week to spare. Thanks to the campaign's success, Hip Hop Fundamentals was able to perform at several city schools in June, including Southwark School in South Philadelphia, Samuel Gompers Elementary and Dimner Beeber Middle School in Overbrook and Mayfair Elementary and Bethune School in North Philly. They plan to visit five more schools in the fall.

It's not a replacement for music class, of course. Or history class. But, dammit, it's something.

MARK WONG FIGURED out the power of hip-hop and dance, he says, while attending Haverford College early last decade. That's when the Bermuda native met his future partners in Hip Hop Fundamentals, Steve Lunger and Joe Sun, meeting up by word-of-mouth to practice hip-hop dance in whatever empty Temple classrooms they could find. "Temple was one of the only places I knew that had a break dance club," he says, "and 'club' meant we were sneaking around the hallways, looking for an empty room."

Wong and Lunger began melding hip-hop and education alongside their friend and colleague Justin Murta, who'd started a group called Hip Hop Handbook. They used the company to verse Philly and regional students on all the components of hip-hop: graffiti, DJing, dance and musical performance. Then, in 2011, Murta decided to move overseas; he handed the company over to Lunger, Wong and their friend Tony "Knuckles" Chanza, who subsequently left as well to compete in international breaking competitions).

The two remaining principals soon renamed the company Hip Hop Fundamentals, refocusing its direction more on academic content. Wong says taking charge was a natural progression: "I'd always been interested in education and almost had enough credits to minor in education at Haverford," he says. "I thought the next step would be teaching in dance studios, but I wanted something that was more performative."

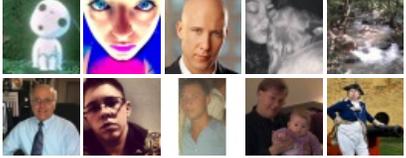
After joining forces with Lunger's childhood friend Troisi, they debuted "Civil Rights Movements" this year—on Martin Luther King's birthday, at the African American Museum on Arch Street. Though the show was meant for children, the museum was packed with adults and families that day, which made the positive response that much more fulfilling. "Connecting with a room of older African-American residents in Philadelphia was really validating," Troisi says, considering they're the ones who lived through the era that Hip Hop Fundamentals is trying to teach.

The dancers know civil rights is a touchy subject often glossed over in public school due to the harsh nature of what happened: the riots, the murders (both high- and low-profile), the ugly background of slavery and its aftermath. But, they say, kids can take it. "Since the beginning of time, kids have had to handle pain, death, famine—they've had to deal with all the same crap that adults have had to deal with," Wong says. "It's not


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sugar-coating, but you have to package it differently so their brains can understand it in a different way.”

“I think the job that we’re trying to do is—we’re being upfront,” adds Lunger. “We’re talking about segregation and racism, and we’re tying civil rights to the hip-hop movement in a way that allows people to have access to it. I think it’s more just the start of a dialogue, a conversation, hopefully, that teachers will pick up.”

SAM REED IS A literacy teacher at Beeber Middle School, which was saved from closure in April. His students experienced one of Hip Hop Fundamentals’ Kickstarted performances earlier this month; they were impressed, he says. “It was really cool how they used hip-hop ... the kids were able to make the connections between contemporary injustices and the injustices which took place back during the civil rights period.” He notes that many of his students, when asked about the performance after the fact, had an ah-ha! moment when they realized they were tricked into learning something.

Which is, of course, the point. The Dana Foundation released a report through Harvard University in 2008, called “Learning, Arts, and the Brain,” which found, among other things, that students who study or learn art in school are more motivated and have greater long-term memory—and that dance, in particular, leads directly to other cognitive skills.

“If you’re already learning about the civil rights movement by reading about it and writing about it, we can be one more piece of the puzzle,” says Wong.

One of their students has already brought what he’s learned through dance into his classroom. Tyrell “Native” White says he’s been breakdancing since 2009, when he met Wong through the Southeast Asian Mutual Assistance Associations Coalition, an after-school program in which members of the hip-hop community teach dance and music at South Philly’s Academy at Palumbo.

“I went to their after-school program, and they said they wanted to have a b-boy workshop there,” says White. “I asked what it was; they said dancing, so I was interested, and I stayed a little longer”—a little longer that has stretched out to four years. Part of what’s come from his hanging with the crew: an “A” on a research paper about Martin Luther King, much of the information of which he originally learned from Wong, Lunger, Sun and Troisi.

White is about to graduate from Freire Charter School at 20th and Chestnut; he hopes to study engineering or design when he attends Community College of Philadelphia this fall. Wong says he’s counting on White earning his associate’s degree and transferring to Temple so he can study abroad his junior year.

“Of course, I’m going to keep on breaking,” White adds. “My goal is to strive to do it until I’m 60, when I’m an old head ... But I also want to study abroad. I hear dancing can get me abroad; it can help, but that’s not my goal. I don’t want dancing to get me somewhere. I want something other than dancing to get me far in life.”

More on Hip Hop Fundamentals: hiphopfundamentals.com. Southeast Asian Mutual Assistance Associations Coalition: seamaac.org.



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