

Queens Village Students Shine

Written by Keith ID820

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Near a neighborhood famed for turning out some of the first hip-hop pioneers, a group of students from IS 109 in Queens Village and their principal recently turned back the clock to the days when the genre featured socially progressive lyrics.

In doing so, they declared a cultural shift in their school they hope will soon become a model both for the educational community and the music industry.

"I think the message is very clear," eighth-grader Tiffany Echevers said after helping to unveil the group's medium, a rap music video and DVD featuring student performances, at Jamaica's York College Jan. 24. "We changed from before and we're better now."

More than 700 people packed York's auditorium to hear the message, including Schools Chancellor Joel Klein, Deputy Mayor Dennis Walcott, City Councilman Leroy Comrie (D-St. Albans) and rap legend Kurtis Blow.

IS 109 was once a school plagued by students fighting, pulling fire alarms and roaming the halls without passes. That changed last year when Shango Blake, a 32-year-old administrator from Laurelton, took over full time, instilling pride and discipline. He instituted a dress code and motivated the students by giving them a project to produce a CD with their own songs, a recording that raised \$2,500 for new sports teams and extracurricular activities.

Blake followed up this year with a music video DVD, using the project to teach the students real-life applications of state education standards as they created budgets, wrote scripts and filmed segments for the video with the help of teachers and the Producers' Project, a non-profit organization in Manhattan.

After months of work, they ended up with a professional-quality music video, one which explained their school's turnaround. Scenes include students rapping on a street near the school, in a classroom and in the hallway with their principal.

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"Dress to success, dress to impress, District 29's the best," one student rhymed. "We got it going on our pride is so strong," another sang. And then the chorus: "What time is it? The time is now, it's time to shine at 109."

Blake said he wanted the student performers to harken back to a time when rap lyrics promoted a social consciousness, not the sex or violence so often heard on the airwaves nowadays. When he was growing up in the "70s and "80s, such acts included the Hollis crew Run DMC and Kurtis Blow, born Kurtis Walker in Harlem and managed by Hollis native and future rap mogul Russell Simmons.

"When Shango was a little boy, I told him not to play that music," said the principal's father, Professor James Blake of Manhattan Borough Community College. "But this is a way you can tap into the language of youth."

Community leaders hailed Blake and his students for their project.

"When people work in a positive manner, we can make change," said Comrie, adding that the City Council was trying to arrange a showing of the video in its chambers to showcase a creative and effective teaching aid to other principals.

"I want to thank the students of IS 109 and Mr. Blake for breaking the cycle of failure that often defines inner-city schools," Walcott added.

Blow recommended that the video should become a model for other schools to follow across the nation. "It has to keep on, it has to grow, it has to flourish in neighborhoods all over the country," he said.

The DVD is on sale for \$20. Blake has already sent a copy to Black Entertainment Television in the hopes of having it played. He has not yet heard back from the station, but the students are keeping the possibility in stride.

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"As long as the message gets out, then we're fine," said Echevers, who worked on the DVD's budget. "We just want to be heard."

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