

Black Males Get H.Y.P.E.

Mental Health Counselor Incorporates Hip-Hop Into Therapy

BY CHANDRA R. THOMAS

Hip-hop is many things to different people. To some it's a popular musical style that glorifies misogyny and materialism; to others it's a lyrical and rhythmic art form reminiscent of the storytelling griots in Africa. To Adia McClellan Winfrey, it's a powerful tool to help young Black males in trouble.

The Atlanta-area mental health counselor has designed H.Y.P.E., a hip-hop therapy program aimed at helping African-American teens. The Healing Young People thru Empowerment program uses familiar hip-hop music, themes and values to help young males and other at-risk young people discuss and address challenges they face at home, in their communities, in school and in their peer relationships.

"These kids are dealing with a lot; molestation, abuse, depression, but they're afraid to talk about it," said Winfrey, of Stone Mountain, Ga. "Then I can play *Lord Knows* by Tupac and by the end they're telling me about how they had a gun to their head, ready to end their life. I'm there to let them know that it's OK and that they're not less of

a man because they've considered suicide or made mistakes in life."

Winfrey, a married mother of four, works mostly with young people in juvenile detention centers and group homes who've gotten into trouble with the law and must fulfill court-ordered counseling. She also travels the country leading H.Y.P.E. workshops that provide mental health professionals and youth advocates with an overview of the curriculum. Online workshops and webinars have provided some international exposure.

A typical H.Y.P.E. session begins with the participants reciting the "H.Y.P.E. Creed, a list of affirmations that include "I believe in myself" and "I will remain true to the hip-hop culture." After a quick discussion centered on the topic of the week, such as depression or atonement, the participants turn

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in journal entries where they share written reflections on the previous week's lesson. The energy level in the room gets, well, more hyped once the music starts. Heads bob, feet tap and some mouth the words as the sounds of artists like Jay-Z, T.I., Ludacris and Notorious B.I.G. blare through Winfrey's iPod speakers. Then a discussion about the song's message follows.

"The music breaks the ice and gets the kids talking about their own struggles," Winfrey said. "The fact that these artists talk

about important issues is bold and brave on their part. Anyone who criticizes hip-hop, I challenge them to try and sit down and write a story and make it rhyme to a beat. They'll see how hard it really is."

During a recent session, the cringe-worthy accounts of gangbanging, illicit sex and violent acts seemed to resonate with the five young men in attendance, as did the underlying messages of frustration, fear, depression and anxiety.

"The music makes me feel like opening up," said one group member, a 15-year-old new father and former gang member now living in an Atlanta area boys home. "Because I know what [the rapper] went through and where they're at today, it makes me feel like I can I make it through too."

Added another 14-year-old attendee, "This [music] brings to light the places where they grew up from and how hard it is living their life," he said.

Winfrey noted that by the end of the H.Y.P.E. program, she sees a difference.

"They're often ready to own their past behaviors and own their futures," she said."

Winfrey, a lifelong hip-hop fan, developed the group-therapy curriculum while working on her doctorate in clinical psychology at Wright State University School of Professional Psychology in Dayton, Ohio. Winfrey says she hopes to expand the curriculum's international reach through the development of H.Y.P.E. en Espanol.

"H.Y.P.E. is more than just hip-hop therapy," she said. "It's hip-hop empowerment!"

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