

# Rhyme and money

Cash dries up but a burgeoning literacy-through-hip-hop program is still trying to reach inner-city youth



GETTING THE WORD OUT: Lynn Worrell (far left) and volunteers

by NADIA HAUSFATHER  
In recent weeks, Writing Our Rhymes Down—a literacy-through-rap program aimed at inner-city youth, aged 10 to 16—has been reaching out for support to get its feet back on the ground and words back in youth's priorities. Its limited funding fizzled out last June. The program started in 2007, when Toronto-based Literacy Through Hip Hop (LTHH) asked Concordia University students Lynn Worrell and Munira Ravji to

pilot its program in Montreal. With small honoraria from the Toronto group, they started organizing the 12-week project at the Tyndale St-Georges Community Centre in Little Burgundy, to give youth an alternative space to develop self-esteem and critical thinking skills through hip hop culture. After weeks of research and outreach, "we took the LTHH platform and made it into something that was our vision," says Ravji. They called it WORD, and were soon

joined by a posse of 10 culturally diverse, mostly student volunteers who knew the limitations of the traditional education system for underprivileged youth. They did one-on-one mentoring with the youth, while the Atwater Library Digital Literacy Project and local artists taught hip hop skills and recorded and mixed the kids' songs.

Nomadic Massive member Nicolas Palacios-Hardy gave freestyle workshops to improve their articulation and writing skills, as he's worried there's a general trend towards eliminating funding towards arts in schools. Hip hop suffers from an additional stigma, he says, because "even though it's mainstream, there are a lot of stereotypes about teaching hip hop for youth in Quebec."

While WORD landed its first official gig at James Lyng High School in 2008 thanks to some funding from the English Montreal School Board, Worrell says she needs financial support to hire permanent staff. To support herself besides the EMSB's honorarium for coordinating WORD, Worrell had to work two jobs, which took time away from administering and searching for permanent funds.

"What we need is a trustee for our organization so it can grow," says Worrell. "Just because the program ended doesn't mean these youths' lives stop. We built relationships with these kids. The youth who came to our program can still get more out of it."

So, in past weeks, they spread the word. They presented rhymes and a short movie at Concordia's Cinema Politica two weeks ago and facilitated a workshop about how hip hop can provide ways of learning that give youth a voice to fight discriminatory "isms" at QPIRG Concordia's Study in Action conference.

Fifteen-year-old Tivon (aka "Titan"/WORD keeps me writin") Thompson—says that without hip hop, "there's no other way that people can hear what I'm trying to express." He spoke about being a victim of police racial profiling and his disappointment with sexist commercial hip hop on Black Entertainment Television.

"There's a stereotype right now that black males can only be tough," says WORD volunteer Ayinde Bennett, and WORD is an opportunity to critically look at those images and provide youth with other role models and socially conscious hip hop. As for 16-year-old Rasheed Williams, he used to shy away from all his teachers, but hip hop helped him through hard times and broke him and his rhymes out of their shell. "I used to be blank. But now I got a flow going on in my head," says Williams, because WORD was a "safe space, people won't judge you. It was like a second family."

NOMADIC MASSIVE WILL PROMOTE WORD AT THEIR CD LAUNCH AT PETIT CAMPUS (57 PRINCE ARTHUR E.), ON SATURDAY, MARCH 28, 8:30 PM, \$75 (CD INCLUDED). FOR MORE INFO ABOUT WORD, E-MAIL: WORDMONTREAL@GMAIL.COM OR SEE THEIR FACEBOOK PAGE.

## PEOPLE

BY CHRIS BARRY

# Talking up the ladies

Helping women succeed takes verbalization of goals and proper packaging of their talents, says workshop leader

Name: Zoonie Nguyen  
Age: 42  
Occupation: Director of Talentelle  
Bio: This uber-motivated NDG dynamo first arrived on these shores at age eight, a dirt-poor Vietnamese boat person who might just as well have been shark food. had it not been for a passing ship that noticed the tiny boat she and two million other pernicked refugees were aboard was in the process of sinking. Graduating from McGill



in 1989 with a degree in electrical engineering, Zoonie enjoyed a happy, lengthy and prosperous career at the CBC before recognizing she "needed to do something more relevant" with her life and quitting, "breaking out" her parents in the process. Deciding to "go full circle," she returned to Asia with her husband to work for an NGO helping people stuck in refugee camps—Zoonie having spent time in one of these camps herself as a child. "When I came back to Montreal again, I just wasn't the same person anymore, not after witnessing all that suffering in Asia." After seeing her two-year-old daughter "nearly die from Kawasaki disease," she determined it was her calling to help other women "succeed in their chosen careers or start-up businesses" so, a few short years ago, she and her brother Peter launched Talentelle. She drives an infinitely practical 1999 Honda Accord.

Something Zoonie has to say about nearly drowning: "It was really bad. I think the only reason why I didn't go crazy from the experience is because I was young enough to see it as an adventure rather than a trauma. I can talk about it without crying now." What Talentelle is: "We have two core workshops really, one for female professionals and another for entrepreneurs. It's all about getting women to verbalize what it is they want to do in life and how they can move forward. We help women discover what's unique about them, their strengths, talents, passions, values and how they can package these things into work that brings them real joy."

So Talentelle is exclusively for chicks? "No, men are welcome, and some do attend, but we do this primarily for women. Talentelle comes from Talent and Elle. I've also just launched a magazine to exclusively promote women's talent in Quebec, lemondedesfemmes.com, because I don't find women being promoted enough here. I mean, women are out there now, ready to take on any job, start any company, they're really, really ready. So why not help them?"

Doesn't she realize she'd be doing society a much bigger favour if she just informed these women that their proper function in the eyes of God is to stay home, have babies, clean up after their husbands and help their men procure younger, attractive women to better satisfy them sexually? Not especially. "I tend to think that by helping women, I'm helping the whole of society." What if you're a chick with a Grade 7 education? "Look, I get people with MBAs and Ph.Ds and others who've barely graduated high school. It's not about education, it's about being in tune with who you are and doing work that reflects this." For the full skinny, go to talentelle.com. Last book read: *The Truth About You*, by Marcus Buckingham. Musical preferences: Edith Piaf, the Pogues, ABBA. Words of wisdom: "It's not about the destination, it's about the journey leading you there."

COMMENTS? DIMWIT@HDDOT.NET

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