Hackable City: Providence: What happens when you use the ideas of open source and hackability in a society, and a city?

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What happens when you use the ideas of open source and hackability in a society, and a city?

Hackability: allowing and encouraging people to make an environment be what they want it to be. Reciprocity between users and designers. Transparency and graceful responses to unanticipated uses.

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Providence City News: David Gonzalez, AS220 Rhode Show

From the City News interview series...

My City: AS220's Rhode Show Coordinator David Gonzalez Fosters Young People's Life Skills Through Art

This summer, when "Celebrate Providence" makes its way back into your local neighborhood parks, a handful of the City's most talented performing artists will be on hand to showcase their best work. Among them, The Rhode Show, the youth performance troupe from AS220 led by 28-year old David Gonzalez.

Formerly housed at the Broad Street Studio on Norwich Avenue, The Rhode Show (comprised mostly of young people from the Rhode Island Training School) has made its way back in to AS220's downtown headquarters on Empire Street.

At the recording studio, Dave takes City News behind the scenes to talk hip hop, their new CD project, and the importance of young people's voices.

What is the Rhode Show and how did it come about? Who is involved in it?

The Rhode Show is a performance troupe dealing with young people age 20 and under. Like Broad Street Studio, we work with kids that are incarcerated in the Rhode Island Training School, which is the youth adjudication system in Rhode Island. We also work with kids in DYCF care and then kids in the community.

The funding then came from the Word! Movement from the Department of Health, so they were this anti-tobacco performance troupe, going around doing little skits and plays about just anti-tobacco things, which was pretty cool and interesting at the same time.

I was transitioning out of the Broad Street manager position here and I wanted to do the performance arts projects. So they made me the performance arts director and one of the programs was the Rhode Show. From that point, I tried to change it to more of kids creating their own universe and fighting against evil businesses that attack young people.

It was a very vague stretch and I tried hard, but then I started realizing that the AS220 mission itself was very alternative and very anti-corporate. So kids doing art for art's sake was what the Rhode Show turned into - like young people educated about art and doing various art projects.

A big part of my endeavor is also the re-claiming of the hip hop culture, trying to get the kids to go back to the elements which is the rebellion stage of hip hop. Put all that together and we have a performance troupe that we sell as an earned income model for Broad Street Studio. Broad Street Studio teaches a lot of workshops and we're very grant-oriented for funding and we're trying to change some of that to some earned income from kids' CDs and products of the arts.
And have you started to develop some CDs for the Rhode Show already?

(Dave hands over a CD).

So, those (the CD compilation) are three projects altogether. The Rhode Show, in the past, has done collaboration with Festival Ballet. It was good. It was fun. It was interesting.

We wrote a couple of pieces to Sebastian Bach. We sampled Sebastian Bach, made hip hop pieces out of it, got some really really dope stuff. One of them on the CD is a young girl that came from the RI Training School into the Rhode Show, made this piece called "Her Last" and it really exposed the ballet audience to a subject matter they didn't even think about hearing. It was really cool. Three shows sold out so we were really excited about it.

How do the kids in the Rhode Show get selected to be part of it?

There's an audition process and anybody who's interested in the Rhode Show automatically gets accepted if they audition. So there's no rejection or anything like that.

One of things about the Rhode Show is that you have to be here all the time. There is no taking off. So if you can't come, we ask you to leave and wait until you can make the commitment.

Tell us about some of the projects that you have done or are doing. What is the general subject matter of your performances and how does that get crafted?

When we first started off, the Rhode Show created this concept directly for the Arts, Culture and Tourism department. We created this concept called "Add-A-Lessons," (derived from the word Adolescence) which is the third thing on the CD. "Add-A-Lessons" was this combination of youth issues brought up by young people through hip hop.

We wanted to cover everything that everyone has ever discouraged or disregarded because of age-ism, like thinking that kids going to school isn't as important as someone going out to get a job. As a matter of fact, you see that some of the troubles and obstacles that are in school are very relevant to a young person's development, which is more crucial than getting a job sometimes.

So we wanted to express some of this stuff. We wanted to express violence in the community, racism in the community, socio-economic status – all these things we just wanted to get out there through a young person's perspective.

When we go to conferences, it's thirty-year old white women that are in the
education system that are talking about our young people’s development. Those are the majority of the people that go to these conferences about education. None of the young people get to speak and we wanted to make an entire CD speaking to them.

When we started realizing who was hiring us, we noticed that the same conferences that don’t have young people are the same conferences that wanted us to showcase for like twenty seconds and then go. So we wanted to take advantage of the opportunity and make an entire performance just for those conferences. And we called it “Add-A-Lessons.”

So we did an entire body of work with that mentality. It’s like, if we had three minutes and you had something to say to someone, someone who can change something, what would you say? That was the whole concept of “Add-A-Lessons.” Your voice is important and your art is extremely important. We can’t get too far from that because that’s just the work of AS220 in general, is that young voices are important and young artists are the joint!

When we start projects, I really try to get inspirations from two things. This time, it’s been Jean-Michel Basquiat just because in his paintings, the amount of chaos in an organized canvas made sense to us. The other artist is Jurassic Five. Those are our two influences this year. To blend the mentality of ‘all is one.’ So take those two things and we should be creating something new.

Why is the Rhode Show valuable to the young people who are in it? Why is it beneficial to both them and the community at-large?

A former Rhode Show member, 18-year old Alex Baptista, who is visiting from college, joins Dave at the studio. He is asked by Dave to respond to the question.

Alex: The benefit of something like the Rhode Show on an artistic level gives a lot of kids a chance to one, have a lot of respect for the recording process ‘cause I know personally I had no respect for the whole music-making and writing process at all before coming here and meeting someone like Dave who pretty much lives and swears by it. So, I guess one thing you do is you really respect what it means to be an artist and it’s not just some turn that people just kick around, and it’s not something you do for fun. People really use this stuff to survive off of. That’s one beneficial thing I got off it.

On a community standpoint, it really makes people realize the power that a lot of young people have. I know that a lot of the people that were really holding it down were a lot of the young people that were really tenacious about it. And they want to do it and they really want to give back to their communities. This is the way they choose to do it.

Dave, what do you hope your participants will take away when they get involved in
the Rhode Show?

It's very much different agendas for different principles of the program. One is that we are a transitional program for the kids coming from the RI Training School – (as well as) for kids in DCYF care, and then kids from the community that just hear about us from AS220. But our main population is the kids in the training school. We go in and I teach two workshops and also have three 1-on-1s with young people in the RI Training School weekly, with the hopes that that sparks some kind of flame for them to come down here.

Through that, my entire objective is (to develop) life skills through arts. To me, there's no difference between making a beat and filling out a job application. There really isn't. It's the dedication you have in yourself in completing something. Knowing how to finish something is the most important part.

One of our mantras is 'the person who focuses longer, wins.' Really trying to get them to understand that everything you do is a focus game. How long can you participate in something and completely be there. It's very Buddhist-Zen in that we want them to be here, be an artist, and try to validate your artistry. Like don't say, 'I'm not a writer,' when you're writing. If the kids can understand the principle of that concept, then I think that life skills just come – why do you have to set your alarm in the morning and wake up, why do you have to keep a book of all your dates and calendars, why do you have to go to the things you say you have to go to. I think then if you can really understand that, then I think that's our entire purpose of being at Broad Street Studio.

Now there's the other side – which is the business aspect. With AS220's campaign to resist corporate music, and just hearing how corporations have taken advantage of young people, hearing the young kids reclaim or learn hip hop and make it evolve, shutting off the radio and creating their own world (will allow) us to get them to learn how important their voice is, and that we really have something – something that's completely unique. Something that's like traditional old school hip hop with young people's views and perspectives.

Where is the future heading for the kids of the Rhode Show?

Where I think, in ten years, where AS220 wants to be, is that these young people can live off their art. This is the most important part for me that they have a real tangible means of living off their writing, or their beat-making, traveling through their writing, traveling through their beat-making.

Why do you this work?

This is all Umberto Crenca's imagination. When I was going from college to college, you know he really saw something in myself that I really didn't capture yet. And he offered me a job and now it's this amazing thing. Bert's aura is something
that attracts me to this place.

And I was living off the arts and spoken word and hip hop myself, and he vaguely asked, ‘can you teach kids how to do this?’ And my ignorant self said yes. I didn’t know what I was doing in life then, but helping create the beginning of Broad Street Studio definitely got me invested in the project.

Imagine saying that we aided the process of incarceration by creating an art transitional program. Kids won’t have to go to their parole officers, they’re going to their drawing classes – that is cool beans! And that if you don’t paint or draw, that’s how you get in trouble – that’s really dope stuff right there. That mission right there is worth it.

The other part is, I’ve learned so much on AS220’s dime, why give it up? I didn’t know how to record, I didn’t know how to create a studio, and they’ve supported me in learning that process. And that’s a very small part of what I’ve learned here. Learning how to handle myself in a professional manner too.

And I’ll stay here until the kids don’t want me anymore.

If you happen to catch The Rhode Show at your neighborhood park this summer, perhaps you’ll want to bring more than a beach chair and a cool drink to the outdoor performance. There is a deeper message to be taken back for sure, but you might have to come with an open mind and listen real carefully.

The youth of the Rhode Show, including Dave, will have worked tirelessly to cook up some food for thought about the everyday life issues affecting them today. And maybe, we can all catch a glimpse of what’s in store for our future.

To learn more about the AS220 Rhode Show, go to www.as220.org or call 467-0701 and ask for Dave Gonzalez. Log on to the ArtCultureTourism website to get updated schedules and performances for this summer’s neighborhood performing arts initiative.

Posted by Allan at 11:03 PM