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By Lindsay Ryan
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PROVIDENCE — Two adolescent boys sit at a metal table and stare at a mixing board and CD station, stark and technological. Vernon Knight flips switches and levers. Da'Shan Zebrowski looks at him and then at the board, puzzled. The huge gray speaker crouching in front of the table is a mute beast. Vernon resumes troubleshooting. No luck.

Vinny Wadlington, 18, lopes over and flicks a slide bar. Suddenly the room is a throbbing containerized pressure wave. The slide bars are no longer just so many pieces of red and white plastic attached to a hunk of incomprehensible circuitry. They are the control pad, the holy grail to creating the beat that says it all, that expresses the inexpressible.

It's a Thursday afternoon at Broad Street Studio, time for the hip-hop class run by Joshua Padilla, 23, better known as Plan B. Broad Street Studio is in a former warehouse in the heart of the South Side. Founded almost three years ago by AS220, it targets youth who have been released from the state Training School or who are under supervision of the Department of Children, Youth and Families. AS220, which holds weekly arts and

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writing workshops at the training school and at the Broad Street Studio, offers youth continued involvement in these activities upon release. The studio also attracts neighborhood youth.

An estimated 40 to 50 primarily high school-age youth pass through each week to engage in a free afternoon of visual art, music, and writing workshops or just to hang out. Eleven adults and 20 paid young people are the staff.

The programs at the studio, which has a large floor mural depicting tobacco executives descending from a Trojan horse into an urban neighborhood, are organized into six major projects: Broad Street Visuals; Broad Street Orchestra; Photographic Memory; Muzine, which publishes poetry and art magazines; and Broad Street Press, which publishes books. Hip-hop 220 is the sixth project.

“Hip-hop is a way to express yourself in arts through the urban culture,” explains Vinny. While hip-hop broadly includes DJ-ing, beatboxing, rapping, breakdancing, and graffiti art, Hip-hop 220 focuses mainly on rapping. Through Hip-hop 220, Broad Street Studio youth have performed at local festivals and events, AS220, and clubs such as Lupo’s. In addition, they have created a mixed CD of original music. Plan B and Vinny, in a group called MIA, just finished a CD.

Vinny sits in front of the CD station. It holds two CDs, each with 15 or 20 beats and effects that can be blended, modulated, and warped ad infinitum.

A large black knob adjusts the pitch. Vinny spins it quickly with his index finger. A clarion soprano slides down into a booming tenor like the voice change of a prepubescent boy on fast forward.

The horizontal slide bar near the bottom adjusts the balance between tracks. Vinny jiggles it. A fast-paced club beat and a steady bass fight it out.

But rhythm has power, and power is sometimes hard to resist. As Da’Shan tries to focus on writing in his dog-eared composition book, he indulges in imaginary drum rolls. Vernon is now working the mixing station, the beat flowing louder and faster and faster. His long fingers seem almost rubbery as they race from dial to slide bar to knob, and his shoulders twitch to the bass beat.

Several other young people are working on art and writing projects around the studio. But their feet tap and their shoulders wriggle; the motion of limbs is subconscious and irresistible.

Plan B is scribbling lyrics on a Providence Police Department crime scene entry sheet steno pad but he sets his pen down, defeated by music. “C’mon, we’ll make up a song right now,” he says. Vernon eases over to the drum set. He has been drumming since he was 4.

Vernon starts slowly, just hitting one drum, and then gradually layers rhythm over rhythm. Plan B starts to freestyle.

“Yeah, I’ve been through the struggles so you know I’m sincere. But I’m going up and this time I’m prepared.”

Another kid steps on stage, and Plan B grabs a gallon jug of water to take a swig. They alternate, playing off each others’ lyrics and common themes of poverty, street life, and decisions to change. Vernon adds rolls and thuds on the bass drum for emphasis. Plan B adjusts the flow of his words to the ever-evolving drum rhythms.

One minute, two minutes, five minutes, and they succumb to mental exhaustion. But there, just for a moment, there it was: the expression of the inexpressible, the fusion of rhythm and soul.
"I don't think hip-hop is something you can learn," Vinny says afterward. "I mean, you can learn the terminology, but hip-hop's gotta be in you. You gotta translate life into rhythm... the visions of the words just start floating in your mind."

Vinny keeps a notebook for lyrics. He writes in the studio, he writes in his spare time, he writes in bed at night. He writes about his life and the life he wished he had.

Vinny came to Broad Street Studio the summer before last, at the encouragement of a guidance counselor at Tolman High School in Pawtucket. He worked with Broad Street Visuals, painting murals and illustrating for the monthly magazine the studio produces.

At the time, Vinny was in Turning Point in Pawtucket, one of a series of group homes that he had been in and out of since the age of 13. His mother couldn't handle him, he says: he smoked marijuana, drank, skipped school, and hung out with kids who stole bikes and sold drugs.

His father, James Wadlington, is in Norfolk County Jail in Massachusetts. Vinny did not meet his father until about a year ago, but his father had sent him hand-drawn cards before then. He has saved them all. Many of the adult males on his father's side of the family are in and out of prison, according to Vinny.

Vinny was in the Taunton Training School for larceny when he was 11 and in Rhode Island Training School the next year on wayward charges. He dropped out of Tolman two years ago. If he returned, he would be placed in ninth grade, he says.

Through it all, he had art. He was always the best at drawing in his classes and won prizes in the state Scholastic Art Awards for his clay sculptures. He wants a career in art more than anything.

"If you have a blank piece of paper, it's like every possible image is already there. You just have to outline it," he says.

So when he found out he could be paid to do art at Broad Street Studio, he applied for the job. He works about 30 hours each week.

In addition to visual art and hip-hop, Vinny is working on a book that is a compilation of his artwork and hip-hop style poetry, and his father's artwork. Broad Street Studio will publish a hundred copies when he is finished. He is also making a solo hip-hop CD and an instrumental CD of beats.

"We want kids to come here and find themselves," Plan B says. "When a kid is 17 and wants a job, they think, 'What can I do? McDonald's, Burger King, fast food.' No, they can work at AS220."

He says music was all that kept him going when he was Vinny's age. At age 13, he began to write lyrics and poems.

Born to a mother addicted to heroin, Plan B was adopted as a toddler and raised in New Bedford. When he was 12, his younger sister died of AIDS contracted at birth, and his adoptive mother sent him to live with her family in Puerto Rico. He returned to Massachusetts when he was 15 to live with his brother, then 17.

Plan B says he began dealing drugs with his brother. When he was 16, he says he often had $5,000 in his pocket from drug sales. He says he brought in extra money as a stick-up kid, robbing other dealers.
But things turned sour, and one of his best friends was sentenced to 15 years to life for a botched robbery. Plan B moved to Orlando shortly thereafter and was there only a few months before being arrested for burglary. He ended up serving 10 months in prison. In lockdown 21 hours a day, the seriousness of his lifestyle began to overwhelm him. He wrote lyrics all day.

When he was released, he hit open mikes in Florida and then Massachusetts. He moved to Providence about two years ago. His first big performance was at an African-American cultural event at Johnson & Wales University.

A friend told him about the hip-hop program at Broad Street Studio. It was, he says, “the transformation of me.” Broad Street Studio fell into place with his goals. After three months of volunteering, he was hired to take over Hip-hop 220 and to run the open mike nights, among many other responsibilities.

He works for Broad Street Studio about 25 hours a week and at AS220 20 to 25 hours organizing events. “This is a house right here. This is like our family,” he says of the studio.

At the end of the day, Plan B waits for the No. 11 bus dressed in black baggy jeans, black jacket, black skullcap. Vinny pulls his hood over his red visor, slings his backpack over a shoulder, and swaggers out the door. To any stranger, they will be just two more nameless young adults in an urban sea of faces. But they have a secret that no stranger knows: they have music.