

## **Hip Hop Congress Profile**

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Since its birth in the Bronx, hip-hop has always been political in nature. It emerged as a tool for inner-city youth to express their frustration about the social and political neglect they were experiencing. In the years since its inception, it has shaped the cultural expression of young people worldwide, spawning hip-hop artists as well as youth communities built around hip-hop, from New York to Nigeria to Palestine.

The Hip Hop Congress (HHC) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that uses hip-hop culture to foster social action, civic service, and cultural creativity among young people. HHC is a chapter-based organization with over 55 U.S. chapters in high schools, colleges, and communities, as well as a growing number of chapters throughout Europe. HHC chapters and members produce and sponsor over 200 hip-hop events a year. Many of these events include emcee/bboy/DJ/graffiti exhibitions and battles, as well as panels, speeches, and screenings, which often take place during the annual hip-hop Awareness Weeks spearheaded by many HHC chapters.

In addition to organizing hip-hop events, through the creation of an international network of contacts, HHC also seeks to help emerging artists pool their resources, sell music, and take advantage of opportunities in the music industry. The Artist Program provides the classes, resources, and mentoring necessary for artists to sculpt their careers and connects artists to opportunities by which they can further hone their skills and gain exposure. The organization's website is an important resource that chapters and artists use to communicate with one another. With over 3,000 hits a month, the website is the face of the HHC that most people know best.

Run by regional delegates, a national office, and a board of directors, HHC is an organization whose biggest strength is its vast reach on the ground, as well as its relationships with other national hip-hop organizations. HHC chapters are starting up in communities where few other organizations have been successful, such as Chicago's Cabrini-Green community, where a new chapter recently formed. HHC has been successful in establishing chapters because of the dedication and outreach of existing chapter members, the longevity of the organization, and the connection that HHC makes with communities around the culture of hip-hop. In addition to the growth of local chapters, HHC President Shamako Noble says: "We've had great success in working with practically every national hip-hop organization in the country, along with a whole host of local partners." Some of these partners include the National Hip Hop Political Convention, Hip Hop Caucus, Hip-Hop Association (H2A), and the Universal Zulu Nation.

In spite of the extensive network developed over the years and the explosion of hip-hop as a cultural phenomenon worldwide, the bridge between hip-hop as a cultural movement and as a political movement is in its early stages. HHC's Politics Initiative marks a transition from HHC's primary status as a music and cultural organization to a network with an articulated

human rights and social justice movement-building focus. This shift is the result of the recognition by members of HHC's leadership of the potential political impact of the hip-hop community. I came to the board with a background in political organizing and have spearheaded the Politics Initiative, along with fellow board members Shamako Noble and Dr. James White.

Rooted in a belief in the powerful potential of the hip-hop movement, the Politics Initiative seeks to build on this history to develop organizing skills and a civic-engagement focus among hip-hop artists and community members. Many hip-hop artists and their fans, though they may have a political orientation and support the importance of effecting social and political change, are not connected with concrete civic-engagement strategies, such as voter registration. As witnessed by the League of Young Voters' Campaign Against Violence, which led to Milwaukee's successful mobilization of the hip-hop community to participate in the 2006 elections, organizing in the hip-hop community can yield powerful results, but the seeds must be sown through localized efforts to educate hip-hop artists and community members.

The Politics Initiative's first major project is to develop a political training and manual for the hip-hop community. The training planned for February 2008 will provide attendees with grassroots organizing skills to build a hip-hop constituency that can fight for change by cultivating the knowledge participants need to move issues through the electoral system, influence elected officials and other decision makers, and hold these individuals accountable for their decisions. The training and manual will include sections on the history of the hip-hop movement, how the elements of hip-hop can be used to build the movement, registering and turning out voters, developing educational materials that will educate people on issues or candidates, working with other organizations involved with a campaign cycle, volunteer recruitment, and writing a media plan and working with the press in advance of a campaign.

The training and manual are intended to help participants further develop organizing skills and strategies and to incorporate civic engagement techniques in a way that provides added value to current work. This training, while focusing on voter-related activities, will also address long-term movement-building strategies that HHC believes are the key to the project's longevity. Individuals who are trained will not only be able to mobilize around an election, but also to organize more effectively around issues. HHC sees this initiative as an ongoing part of the organization and is committed to making it available to partner organizations.

The Politics Initiative has immense potential to build on HHC's history of hip-hop organizing. Hip-hop as a cultural movement lends to many activities which provide localized opportunities for issue-based organizing. As Noble states, "You cannot be successful in organizing in hip-hop unless you are organizing around the culture itself." Through the HHC chapters, there is already a strong foundation of relationships and cultural events into which more direct political and civic organizing can be integrated.

In addition to the Politics Initiative training and manual, HHC is involved in other work to document hip-hop communities. This information is critical to understanding the community's reach, as well as *where* and *how* organizing efforts can fit and be most effective. Most people assume that the community consists of emcees, break dancers, DJs, graffiti artists, and fans, but the tentacles of the culture reach far beyond that. An entire industry supports the

overall culture. It includes everything from record labels to youth centers, performance venues, equipment manufacturers, clothing companies, and nearly all forms of media, including television, radio, film, video, and print.

In the Pacific Northwest, HHC, in collaboration with the Temple of Hip Hop and 206 Zulu, Seattle's chapter of the Universal Zulu Nation, is working to create a historiography of the hip-hop movement in the region. To begin, the project has launched a first-of-its-kind survey that will "empirically identify the scope and unique needs of our diverse community" and will provide valuable information to aid community organizations to address these needs. This information will be offered a resource for urban arts community organizations to "quantifiably measure the impact of their work." The Seattle Hip Hop Community Survey is a pioneering effort that will provide valuable information on the community itself, as well as the impact the community makes on the region and serves as an important model for other regions to consider.

HHC hopes to expand the Politics Initiative, but faces the challenge of many hip-hop organizations: it has been difficult to secure funding from foundations and individual donors, partly because hip-hop activism straddles many forms of organizing—youth, culture, people of color, and so on—which makes traditional funding streams difficult to access. With the need to focus on one project at a time, the organizers are making the Politics Initiative training and manual their first priority. Information from the Seattle project will also provide valuable data for HHC and other community groups to show the breadth, viability and impact of hip-hop culture. With an upcoming presidential election and numerous issues that local chapters are facing, HHC believes that the upcoming political training and research on hip-hop communities will be tools that chapters and other hip-hop organizations can use to mobilize the change that reflects the social and political vision that sparked hip-hop at the beginning.