

FEATURES

I know I made a difference' ECSU grad tells of struggle to give hope and purpose to inner city 'problem youth'

By Ursula McMillion

When Lisa Gregory graduated from ECSU with a degree in English/News media, she never dreamed she would be threatened by a cocaine addict holding a chair, or stop a student from setting another student's hair on

Gregory faced these and other difficulties while working at the Woodstock Job Corps Center of Woodstock, Md. in 1989, instructing students from ages of 16-21 in preparatory courses for the General Education Diploma (GED) examination. The students who come into the Job Corps are usually high school drop-outs seeking a GED and a vocational trade.

Some of the problems Lisa faced were pyromaniacs, teenage alcoholics, teenage mothers, homeless students and students who had to serve as parents for their younger brothers and sisters because of drug-addicted parents.

"Students were so diverse in their backgrounds," said Gregory. "I often took their problems home with me because I was not only a teacher but a counselor, mother figure and friend to many of the students."

"About 90% of the students and all were African-American," said Gregory. The students were inner city youth from Baltimore, Philadelphia and Richmond, whom officials had labeled as "problems."

"I really believe that I was hired because the administration assumed that because I was Black I could identify and empathize with all the Black experiences," said Gregory, an Elizabeth City native. "That was not true because I don't know what it's like to

be 17 and pregnant with my fifth child and worried that my other four children may be eaten by rats. I was not exposed to frequent alley shootings or big time drug operations in Elizabeth City. I don't know what it feels like to sleep on a park bench because I have nowhere to call home. I don't have drug addicted parents.

"I was like Mary Tyler Moore." Despite the difficulties Gregory faced she tried to instill drive and purpose in her seemingly hopeless students.

"I had to prepare the students psychologically before I could teach them," she said. "I told them that the term 'can't' should not be in their vocabulary."

Lisa used different tactics to instruct as well as combat classroom violence and other disruptions. She often had an uphill battle gaining respect and credibility because she was the youngest employee at the facility.

Although she didn't receive respect from what she called "the petty-thinking majority," she stood her ground with her students. They began to respect her and playfully compare her with Homey D. Clown, a character on the TV Show *In Living Color*, by saying "Ms. Gregory don't play that."

"I knew that I could not be afraid and survive," said Gregory. "I told the faculty and the students that I was not there to win a contest, but to do a job."

"The administration did not always agree with how I handled certain situations," she said. "They often told me to write it up and they would get to it, and they did get to it—three to four months later. Sometimes local authorities would end up handling problems that the administration could have taken care of, if prompt and adequate

disciplinary measures had been taken." Some of the problems Lisa faced were students rolling razor blades underneath their tongues, students brandishing homemade weapons and a girl trying to set someone's hair on fire.

One particular student threatened to harm Gregory with a chair. She reported this to an administrator who virtually ignored her because this was the first report against the student. According to Gregory most students were not properly reprimanded until their third or fourth offense.

"The student who threatened me with the chair was a cocaine addict," said Gregory. "When I reported this threat and addiction, the administrators felt that I was overreacting and told me that I didn't have the professional ability to make this type of assessment. Two months later the Baltimore Police came to the center and arrested the student—who had in his possession a considerable amount of cocaine."

In another incident Gregory felt one of her students had a mental disorder and reported her to administrators. Nothing was done. A few weeks later the girl set another girl's hair on fire during class. According to Gregory this was not a strong enough reason for the administrators to dismiss the student from the facility.

"The student was finally expelled a couple of months later when she was discovered standing over her roommate, who was in bed, trying to set her on fire."

Many of the students at the center had a serious desire to learn and to better their lives.

"A large number of the students with potential didn't complete their

studies at the center because the negative students would pull them down to their level," said Gregory.

One student who touched Gregory's life at the center was Jamal Warner (not his actual name), a native of Virginia.

"Jamal was intelligent to the tenth power," said Gregory. "I wish I had the cognitive abilities that he possessed."

Although Jamal was not under Gregory's instruction they would spend time chatting and exchanging information.

"He taught me about his religion and I assisted him with his studies after school," said Gregory.

He would stop by her class as she quizzed them with the Genius Edition of Trivial Pursuit. He would zip through the game with no problem.

"Jamal was not only academically gifted," said Gregory. "He was also streetwise."

After Gregory's resignation, Jamal left the center on vacation status. When Gregory called back to the center to check on his progress, the center told her that he had not returned. She called again only to find out that Jamal, while spending time with his father in New York, had been shot and killed in a drug deal gone bad.

According to Gregory, Jamal was a student with great potential who had simply taken the wrong direction due to "societal influence." He was the third student she had lost. The other two deaths came as no surprise to Gregory because she had begun to recognize and accept the signs of potential fatalities in the relentless and sometimes macabre environment of the inner city.



Photo by Jackie Roussier

ECSU grad Lisa Gregory spent two years working at the Job Corps in Woodstock, MD, helping inner city "problem" youths prepare for the General Educational Development Exam.

The centers provide housing, educational and vocational courses and extracurricular activities for the students. It is a national program administered and funded by the Department of Labor.

"Sometimes I felt as if the Center was all about money because the officials at the center would allow students with obvious discipline problems to stay," said Gregory. "The longer the student would stay, the more money they would get from the government."

Although Gregory had problems with both students and administration at the center, she says she misses it and would not trade the experience for

anything else in the world.

During her two year tenure she received copies of GED's from students, directed a commercial for the Job Corps, and her play, *International Discovery (Say No to Drugs)* was performed by students at the Job Corps Summer Gold Games. The play placed first in the state of Maryland and second in the region.

"Even though I had a tough time, I know I made a difference," said Gregory, who is presently free-lancing for the *Virginian Pilot/Ledger Star*.

"There's a book in me somewhere," said Gregory. "And it could very well be about my experiences at the Job Corps Center."



Illustration by Kevin Cruz

H i p H o p A celebration of the African soul through music, fashion, grafitti

By Tarick Scott

Essay

Most people associate the term "hip hop" with rap music. That relationship between hip hop and rap music is direct and deep, but hip hop also is primarily an African cultural movement that manifests itself in visual arts, dance, language, music, fashion, graffiti and religious representation.

What separates this art form from others in America or the world is its direct line to the streets—or, more specifically, the ghetto, where minority groups are insulated from European America. It is here where ethnic groups usually revel in their history and culture.

The African, being stripped of his history and culture when abducted to this country, had nothing on the surface to celebrate. But within each African beats a vibe from the mother land—a vibe which some people refer to as "soul."

In his introduction to David Toop's *The Rap Attack: African Jive to New York Hip Hop*, Tony Van Der Meer writes, "This cultural expression (hip hop) was nurtured by a long heritage of slavery and resistance to racial, economic, political, social and cultural oppression."

Hip hop is the result of Africans in America questing for their identity other than the European one that was forced upon them. This art form is not limited to "minorities." Hip hop deals with universal themes and yearnings, the need for economic gain, political power and the right to live free from discrimination.

Let's climb down from the 1990 branch of the hip hop tree to the roots of the art form.

We travel back to the birthplace of civilization, Africa. There we can find the hip hop blueprints of rap, graffiti, dance, music and fashion. In West Africa, the Savanna Griots sang of social problems and boasting. Drums were an essential instrument in these ancient African ceremonies and celebrations. Hieroglyphics on the temple and pyramid walls communicated what the African of that time was about, just as contemporary graffiti on the A-train communicated the hopes and dreams of urban youth. The

(spray painted) subvans traveled through all of the inner burroughs of the city, giving the rest of New York and the world a glimpse of what life is like in the places seldom seen by the outside world.

The young pioneers of hip hop did what they did because it came from the heart. There were no platinum albums to be made or graffiti clothing to be sold. Their work was for the pure love of the art and competition.

Today hip hop is being exploited commercially—especially in fashion and music, as corporate America is starting to realize the major influence that African culture has on society.

But the music and fashion merchants are skimming off the surface of hip hop and neglecting its substance. Stars like MC Hammer and Vanilla Ice are exploiting hip hop without paying tribute to the true originators—the ghetto youths.

Writing in the *Village Voice*, Rob Tannenbaum wrote this about Vanilla Ice, "This mediocre white superstar rapper treats hip hop as just another sub genre to be subsumed and distorted by the top 40 juggernaut."

Then there is the McDonald's commercial depicting African people shucking and jiving just to sell over a billion more burgers. On the outside these few examples appear to be hip hop related, but where is the substance?

The cosmetic look is easy to duplicate, but the true soul is not. Since hip hop is of African origination, its by products all bear some sort of relation to the African. Will hip hop suffer the same fate as other African-in-America art forms, such as rock & roll? Can hip hop be exploited so much that the majority of African people do not associate themselves with it, much less acknowledge that their people created it?

Are we to learn from the past and keep what's African pure? In "Who Stole the Soul?" Public Enemy sing, "Ain't no difference than in South Africa/Over here they'll go after ya to steal your soul, like over there they stole our gold."

(Tarick Scott, a freshman Music Industries major, is from Long Island, New York.)

ECSU to offer new filmmaking class

By Rene Knight

Do you dream of becoming the next Spike Lee? Do you yearn to make music videos, docu-dramas, or commercials?

If so, then you'll be glad to know that the University's first filmmaking class will be offered in the spring semester through the Art Department.

"Wherever your imagination is, we can take you there with the equipment we have," says Professor Eugene O'Neal, who will teach the course. Included in the University's equipment are a computer to enhance graphics, a video camera, editing equipment and two screens for viewing.

O'Neal said students taking the three-hour course will make their own films. "They will learn camera techniques, script writing, film editing, and post production."

The class will begin with an introduction to the use of the video camera.

"They will learn all the parts of the camera," said O'Neal, "and how to use it." Students will also learn "how segments are put together into a final format," he added.

The class will be structured around group projects, said O'Neal. "Each group will have specific things to do, and then we will rotate students, to give them an opportunity to work on different things."

Projects will begin with planning sessions, in which the class decides what type of films they want to make, and make make such choices as whether or not to add music to the film. Each project will be original, O'Neal said, something that the class decides on.

"By the end of the semester every student will have a working understanding of film production from start to finish," O'Neal said. "And once they're out in the world, they'll have the insight and experience under their

belt." O'Neal, who owns and operates a photography studio in Elizabeth City, has had extensive experience in making videos through his business. He has also "attended seminars and workshops in the field," he said.

He has been working on getting the class started for two years.

The class will be limited to 15 students per semester, O'Neal said, adding that more than "would be hard to handle, considering all of the work they will be required to do."

"I think it's going to be a good class," he said. "Students will learn a lot technically, being as that we are a TV-oriented society."

O'Neal said the class could help the entire student body, citing as an example such projects as "Career Day."

"We can make an entire film, in house, about that," said O'Neal. "It could be filmed and edited in house."