The Monday profile - Rapper makes, then leaves tracks for kids

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In the classrooms of some of the city's poorest elementary schools, time is measured not by the clock so much as the weekly appearances of the man they call Mr. Joseph. He arrives in perfectly pressed shirts and spotless Adidas shell-toed sneakers, trailing cologne down the hallway and carrying a microphone just like the one the children know from the movie "Hustle and Flow."

For the past two years, Mr. Joseph -- known as Joseph Garcia on official documents, such as his birth certificate, and as "Craziness" on infinitely more important documents, such as CD covers and concert posters -- has worked at several Portland elementary schools, teaching free after-school classes on hip-hop.

Financed by a two-year grant from the Children's Investment Fund, a special property tax levy approved by city voters in 2002 to support children's programs in Portland, Garcia's weekly lessons on beat making, digital recording and rap writing have resulted in measurably higher grades and improved attendance among his students.

But there have been outcomes more mysterious and difficult to quantify. A 10-year-old boy plays the rap video the class recorded over and over at the home he shares with his father, who has raised him since he was a toddler, and imagines his future. A 12-year-old, when told by his mother that the family might move soon, responds: "How can I leave this? How can I leave Wednesdays? How can I leave Joseph?"

Garcia, 24, is small and wiry with artistically razored sideburns and the impeccable wardrobe of someone who has insisted on ironing all his clothes, including T-shirts, since he was 9. He didn't foresee this level of influence.

As a child who struggled mightily in school (and was once told by a vice principal to stop wasting time attempting to graduate), the thought that he was now a teacher himself left him awestruck.

But when he thought deeply about his situation as coordinator of the Urban Music Project at Ethos Inc., a nonprofit music education center on North Killingsworth Street, lugging microphones around the city to give voice to children, he could see that there was a certain logic to it all, that he had, in the words of his mother, "come full circle."

Life in the Zone

He grew up in a part of Spokane the police sometimes called the "Twilight Zone." The city's infamous "Felony Flats" were eight blocks from his front door.

Garcia's mother, Carol Kinney, remembers that she wouldn't let her boys walk to the McDonald's two blocks away after dark for fear they'd catch a stray bullet, the way one of her son's friends had. Later, the girlfriend of one of Garcia's best friends was kidnapped and killed in the neighborhood. Once, someone on an arson rampage set fire to the family's garage.

"Joe did not grow up in a good zone," says Kinney, a single mother who worked two full-time waitress jobs to support her family. "I would have moved if I could have afforded it. When you're hearing gunshots in the night and sirens all the time, that's not a place for anyone to be."

It's harder still when reading is a struggle, when dyslexia jumbles all the words on the page; when the kids learn you're Native American, and the slurs come hard and fast; when your mom is at work all the time, and the neighborhood is calling. There were fights. Suspensions. Thefts. Bad decisions. His quick temper earned him the nickname "Craziness."

All along, music was a refuge -- "my way out from all that was going on." From the time he was little, Garcia lost himself in songs. "I was the kind of kid who put the same song on repeat all day until it made everybody crazy," he says.

Once, at a house party, he saw someone rapping and knew immediately that was what he wanted to do. He spent hours in his bedroom writing lyrics. He filled so many pages, his mother bought a case of notebooks at a discount store. He filled those, too.

His mother can picture him still, on a family camping trip in the middle of the wilderness, off to one side, writing. He became a regular at freestyle circles. Soon, rap was all he could think about.

A special teacher

Turning points come in all kinds of forms. Sometimes, they are subtle shifts, barely perceptible. Other times they are bold deviations, the chapter titles of a life. For Garcia, it was, as he liked to think of it, "The Moment When I Decided to Flip It Positive."

It came down to a teacher who took a special interest in him and helped link his education to his love of music. She assigned him to read the biography of Russell Simmons, the founder of Def Jam records and a statesman of hip-hop. She told him to research music contracts. She found ways to connect classroom lessons to what he wanted to learn most.

Her methods were rooted in an appeal to Garcia's more practical nature: "She said, 'You want to own a studio and all this before you can even spell 'studio'? And I was like, 'OK, you're making sense now.' "

He worked tirelessly for her, and although he earned enough credits to graduate on time, he decided to return for a second senior year. "I knew I wasn't ready," he says. "I wanted to learn more."

The impact of that experience was not something he connected to his current situation until fairly recently -- even though every

morning, when he opened his refrigerator to get milk for his cereal, a magnet on the otherwise bare door stared back at him: "Teaching today touches tomorrow."

When he looks back on it now, it was as if everything fell neatly into place, leading him to the present.

Not long after graduation, he opened a studio in his basement in Spokane, constructed with egg cartons for sound-proofing and financed by the sales of a CD he recorded in one marathon weekend and hustled on Spokane corners and outside clubs. More albums followed, and he started making beats and recording for other people.

A label of his own

He started a label, called Final Cut Records because he liked the way it sounded, liked the way it implied the best version of something. It was all independent, true do-it-yourself -- posters tacked to telephone poles, word of mouth, his mom offering to keep the racks stocked at Hastings record stores.

Then a call came from Garcia's half brother in Portland. He had just bought a house, had lots of room. Would Joe consider coming out and living with him?

Here's where the calculus of survival kicked in. Garcia looked at his neighborhood and saw his childhood friends heading to prison. He considered his odds and weighed them against his ambitions.

The day he left Spokane, his mother celebrated.

Garcia's arrival in Portland turned out to be more fortuitous than he could have imagined. The half brother is Charles Lewis, the founder of Ethos. And Lewis had learned recently that the person running his fledgling Urban Music Project was moving away.

The project was designed to reach children who might not sign up for a traditional music class. So at schools and after-school programs throughout the city, Garcia started lugging laptops, video cameras and microphones to help children create and record music.

He turned writing rhymes into English lessons and taught math through counting and dividing beats. He turned the equipment over to the children, letting them master the technology behind mixing and dubbing. He showed them free software they could download if they wanted to try creating music at home.

Turning point for kids

The students reminded him so much of himself at that age. He thought a lot about how much it would have helped him to have something like this in school, what a difference it had made in his life when he finally felt that kind of connection. "I'm coming in at their turning point," he told himself.

When his mother asked for a picture of him -- "Once they graduate from school, you never get pictures anymore," she lamented -- Garcia sent her pictures of his students accompanied by detailed explanations of how each was doing in the class, who was good at writing beats and who was good at filming music videos.

It was especially gratifying when Ethos looked at the test scores and attendance records of students in his and other Ethos after-school programs through the Children's Investment Fund. Sixty-seven percent had improved grades, 79 percent had no discipline or behavioral referrals, and 40 percent had improved attendance.

It was enough to move a man to testify, as Garcia did on a recent weekday afternoon, when he trooped over to the offices of Jammin 95.5 FM to record an interview for the station's weekly public affairs show, "What's Good in the Hood."

He had been up late the night before, recording an album in the studio he put together in his Northeast Portland home. He was hoping to finish it in time for a June release.

Garcia looked tired and was still recovering from a bout of food poisoning he suspected he'd picked up from a plate of nachos he'd ordered at a club where he had gone to check out a local reggaeton group. But the minute the interview began, Garcia started speaking with rapid-fire sincerity about how important it was to "give all kids the chance to experience music."

The sad thing was he couldn't show people what he meant.

He couldn't take them to one of his classes, and let them see all the joy and humor and excitement he saw every day. He couldn't let them listen to the kids try to find the right rhyme for "crazy." ("Shaq's eye is lazy?") Or listen to the way he reassured a girl struggling to write about a boy with the face she can't erase, so fine, so fly, she thinks of him day and night. ("It's great you're working with your emotions like that -- good work.")

Moment with the mic

It was a shame they couldn't hear Anthony Allen, 12, from Vernon Elementary talk about how "this class makes me want to come to school -- we can relate to Joseph; there's like a bond there." A shame they couldn't see the moment Max Resendiz finally took the microphone.

Max, a quiet 12-year-old from Vernon, often seemed overshadowed by louder, more confident classmates. For a time, he kept largely to himself, writing quietly. When it was his turn to take the microphone, it was hard to tell what was going to happen. But the words

just poured out of him -- more, it seemed, than he had said in days.

"It's Max with the money green/I don't pay my tax/When I get up on the mic/I spit hot raps/Like Snoop Dogg and Jay-Z/Everybody pay me/Some call me lazy/But I rap daily."

"You got it, Max!" Garcia whooped, as if he were recording one of his own tracks. "You're flowing."

Max allowed the briefest of smiles, and then it was gone. But he was the last one to leave that day, lingering for as long as he could before finally whispering, "Peace, Joseph," and slipping out the door -- with one last look back at his teacher, who was carefully saving this week's breakthrough track.

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