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ROXBURY

From her mike to the young ears of hip-hop: peace

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By Matthew M. Burke, Globe Correspondent | January 21, 2007

Two days after sixth-grader Luis Gerena was shot to death in the Bromley-Heath public housing development in Jamaica Plain this month, Cindy Diggs was on the airwaves at Touch FM.

"I want to see everyone that was involved in hip-hop back in the '90 s, even the OG s that were on the block, I want to see you going out and supporting the young people," Diggs was saying into the radio mike on WTCH, 106.1, based in Grove Hall in Roxbury.

"They don't want to hear that their friends are passing away and that there is no hope. . . . Peace is possible; that's all I want to say. Peace is possible."

The 41-year-old peace activist and founder of Peace Boston 2006 was clad in a black and purple Start Peace T-shirt and purple hat. She also wore a purple bracelet; the color has become synonymous with the peace movement over the past year. Her jeans were torn at the knees and had "Peace" written on them.

Diggs, known for trying to promote peace in conjunction with the Boston hip-hop community, was at the radio station celebrating Martin Luther King Day as well as the first year anniversary of Peace Boston. The peace group has been redubbed Peace Boston 2007, with the start of Diggs's own radio show on Touch FM.

Although the mood in the studio was relaxed and jovial, Diggs was intense about the message she was trying to send.

The reason the number of homicides in Boston last year (74) was only one less than the year before despite her group's efforts, she said, was because of the slashing of youth programs in the city.

"A lot of the issue that's stopping us is finances," the youth worker said. "I've actually been out of work since August because my program was cut," Diggs added, referring to the Project Friendship program at Children's Hospital that was cut when its grant ran out, she said. She said that it was the fourth youth program she has been a part of in the past seven years that has been cut.

Diggs was joined for the debut of the Peace Boston radio show by DJ Black , otherwise known as Rick Wideman , who used to DJ for Made Men ; station co-owner/general manager Charles Clemons ; Erik Wissa , of Critical Breakdown , a hip-hop culture advocacy group; and Tina Cherry , chief executive of the Louis D. Brown Peace Institute , among others.

They played music by Tupac , Edo G , and James Brown , all while reciting peace prayers, discussing the peace movement and the power of advocacy, and holding a call-in birthday contest to win a Peace Boston T-shirt.

Clemons, who grew up in Mission Hill and Dorchester, said he is trying to instill some pride and positivity in Roxbury and Dorchester with his programming. He said Diggs's Peace Boston message fits in with the direction of the fledgling station.

"Take a community that constantly hears negative things; think how it affects them," Clemons said. "So my job is to take my community and do positive things. Peace Boston is a positive movement."

Diggs said that 2007 will see a lot of new projects for her group, which last year helped organize the 11th annual Mother's Walk for Peace on behalf of the Louis D. Brown Peace Institute and was part of Boston's annual hip-hop concert at City Hall Plaza.

This year the group hopes to get Boston's hip-hop artists to donate songs to a "Peace in the Streets" CD, and will also keep selling Start Peace T-shirts.

Diggs said about half the revenue from T-shirt sales is going toward the CD and half has gone to some of the 12 youth programs her group works with, including the Peace Institute and Save the Youth Ministries.

The newest shirt, "Bean on the Map" Start Peace T-shirt designed by teens involved with Artists for Humanity, sells for \$19.99 at such places as High Voltage at Downtown Crossing and Hip Zepi USA stores.

Diggs said she believes Peace Boston is making some headway despite virtually unchanged homicide numbers last year.

Kids are wearing the T-shirts to funerals and memorial services to send a message to their peers, she said.

She added that the hip-hop community has been very supportive for over a year now, and that lends credibility to the movement.

"It's definitely progressing," Diggs said. "This time last year we were having people that were [saying] 'We don't want to wear purple' and 'We're not really about peace,' but everybody's talking about peace now." ■

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