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Using a hip-hop approach to problems

Campers learn about life with the positive side of music genres plagued by a bad, earned reputation.

By Ryan Vaillancourt



Singer Jeremy Bryan talks to children about dealing with their problems in positive ways at Camp Max Straus in La Crescenta on Saturday afternoon. The hip-hop group Figureheads were on hand to talk to kids about dealing with the pressures of their lives productively. -- Alex Collins / News-Press

The Figureheads, a youth-oriented hip-hop trio from Wisconsin, may not be your typical brand of summer camp entertainment, but for about 100 young campers at Camp Max Straus in La Crescenta on Saturday, the group was a hit.

"They're cool," camper Luis Nieto, 11, said. "They're trying to tell us to not take drugs, not get in fights, lead a good life."

Equipped with microphones and a computer stocked with original beats, the Figureheads delivered their unique brand of hip-hop to campers in a series of educational workshops.

The music is unique because unlike a lot of popular hip-hop and rap music that glamorizes misogyny and crime, their message is positive and their mission is to educate, Bryan said.

"Rap music has a bad, um, rap," says a note in the group's promotional material. "It's earned, no question."

The group's members — lyricists Jeremy Bryan and Greg Marshall and producer Dave Olson — consider themselves equal parts educators and artists, and their performances also function as community development efforts, Marshall said.

Camp Max Straus, which is run by Jewish Big Brothers Big Sisters, a nondenominational nonprofit organization, is a fitting venue for the Figureheads because many of the program's campers lack positive role models at home, said Dan Witzling, the organization's director of communications.

"These are kids who don't have the means to go to camp," said Witzling of the more than 1,000 children who make their way through Camp Max Straus over the course of the summer.

With the help of social service agencies and schools, the camp draws children from throughout Los Angeles County, Witzling said.

Children stay for a week or two weeks at the overnight camp, tending the garden, hiking, learning to ride horses and, on Saturday at least, getting mentored through hip-hop music.

"You got a gift inside and it's time to stir it up," said Bryan and Marshall to a group of campers, reciting the chorus of one of their songs. "Make up your mind and decide to stir it up. Don't give up, keep trying to stir it up."

Bryan, a former substitute teacher, and Marshall, a part-time tutor and mentor for autistic children, both come from educational backgrounds, they said. But it's their cool demeanor and fluency with popular, colloquial language that appeals to the kids, said Margy Feldman, president and chief executive officer of Jewish Big Brothers Big Sisters of Los Angeles.

"The kids see that you can be cool and you can be hip, but you can also be a good citizen," Feldman said.

It's a message that soon will be playing through camper Jorge Diaz's, 11, stereo, thanks to a new Figureheads CD provided by the group, he said.

"My mom will let me listen to it," he said.