

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Drilling Down in Chicago's South Side Ganglands

Branko Tubic · Wednesday, April 22nd, 2015

Nearly three years ago, an unsuspecting session of listening to local music motivated a 25-year-old Chicagoan to begin a campaign that aims to rescue lives.

That day, Julien Drayton, a native of Chicago's often-seedy Ashburn neighborhood, created the R.I.P. Chiraq (pronounced shy-rack) Foundation after the music he was listening to appeared to be nothing more than a celebration of the criminal lifestyle that plagued his neighborhood and many others across his hometown.

The music that unsettled and later inspired Drayton is called drill. Drill music, or drilling, is a hyper-local style of rap that originated in the city's South Side ganglands. On the surface, it sounds like the regular rhyming most are used to. However, what separates drilling from all other forms of hip-hop is the dizzying blend of non-stop personal threats and mysterious gang slang that often makes sense to no more than a few city blocks or apartment buildings.

Think of drillers as musical ambassadors, reporters, archivists, and public relations specialists for Chicago's gangs.

Even worse, the intimidation and provocations are often acted on, naturally leading to new eruptions of violence and updated drills.

Eventually, the music, gang culture, and violence blended together to create a new, negative reality for many young people in Chicago. Everything from music to language to clothing, and even life or death, was directly linked to this lifestyle that many tie to Chicago's recent uptick in bloodshed.

The hardscrabble expanses on the city's South and West Sides where all this takes place was even christened with a new name: Chiraq, Drillinois.

(The sinister portmanteau "Chiraq" salutes the fallen of "Second Second City," while the Drillinois pays homage to the adjacent drill culture.)

Drayton recognized that there was lots of power behind this new lifestyle. He also realized that it contained the ingredients for his remedy.

So with the hope of tapping in Chicago's circuit of negative energy, the R.I.P. Chiraq Foundation was established to create new lives through alluring full-time jobs that contain elements of the culture already familiar the lawbreakers.

The work itself is largely up to the individual. Whether it's endeavors like producing music or managing a local act or writing your memoir or designing and pressing T-shirt isn't important to the Foundation. What's key to them is that you're off Chiraq's grid and have a constructive job that you'll want to return to, unlike, say, lackluster convicted felon manual labor gigs or being a drug corner sentry.

While attractive jobs and steady income is the foundation of Drayton's New Deal, he added that extra assistance through the group was also a critical step. For example, changes like signing up for school or finding an apartment away from the "other Chicago" are going to be steadfastly stressed. Also, having someone to call or a place to defuse when temptation arises is part of the group's sweeping approach.

Additionally, R.I.P. Chiraq's staff will have the responsibility of building and expanding the group's portfolio of possible employees. Since R.I.P. Chiraq's personnel largely come from the embattled areas they want to resurface, Drayton noted that keeping an updated roster shouldn't be difficult.

What has been proven to be very difficult is funding. The Foundation's initial launch calls for 40 Chiraq hard-liners to get hired. At a proposed \$10 dollars an hour, the group estimates that it would need the giant amount of about \$850,000 dollars to simply make the first year's payroll.

To date, everyone from local athletes and celebrities to Bill and Melinda Gates have received requests. Although there's been some slight interest from smaller groups, a financial home run has yet to be hit.

Unfazed, the organization plans to write more letters, send more emails, and make more phone calls in the name of fundraising, and, ultimately, what they see as a matter life or death.

And in the event of zero outside financial assistance, Drayton has issued himself an immense personal and professional challenge: somehow, he'll fund the project himself.

"I guess the issue is not big enough, not important enough. I see that I have to make money myself," said Drayton while discussing how his life's path and the group may have to directly overlap.

While capital remains difficult to find, people qualified for R.I.P. Chiraq's reverse employment background checks remain abundant. In 2014, the city took the macabre title of "America's Murder Capital" by tallying 407 slayings and suffering a 14 percent increase in shootings compared to the previous year, according to The Daily Beast.

Whether or not the R.I.P. Chiraq Foundation can break the curse and not join the list of Chicago's many failed anti-violence movements is still to be determined.

To contact the group or make further inquiries, email them at RipChiraqFoundation@gmail.com or search for "R.I.P. Chiraq Foundation" through FaceBook, YouTube, or Twitter.

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