



MAPPING THE BLUEPRINT TO THE SOULS

How BluePrintForLife is using break-dancing
to break barriers and help native communities
hip-hop their way to healing

Stephen “Buddha” Leafloor might not initially seem like your typical youth support worker. However, it’s precisely this unconventionality which makes his youth engagement efforts so effective. Since 1982, Leafloor has achieved a prolific career within the world of hip-hop. As the co-founder of Canada’s oldest b-boy break-dance crew, The Canadian Floor Masters, his dancing has been featured on MuchMusic, as well as in various music videos and documentaries. He too has performed for James Brown, Rapper IceT, Grandmaster Flash, BlackEyed Peas and George Clinton, among others.

Along with his immersion in the world of hip-hop, Leafloor has dedicated his life to youth advocacy: with a Masters in Social Work, he has over 27 years of experience as a social worker. As such, it seemed a natural progression for him to combine his love of hip-hop with his passion for youth outreach. In 1996, Leafloor founded BluePrintForLife, an organization with the mission of aiding struggling youth and connecting communities through the power of hip-hop. Since then, BluePrintForLife has worked in over 50 Native and non-Native communities across Canada, and impacted over 5,000 Aboriginal youth. They too have begun to expand their programming to address new needs and challenges, such as working within youth corrections facilities-- an initiative which has seen much success in its early stages.

In honor of their ground-breaking work, Leafloor and the BluePrint team have received numerous accolades, including an award from former Governor General, Michaëlle Jean, regarding outstanding achievement and outreach. In 2012 Stephen Leafloor was selected as one of Canada’s Top “45 over 45” for Zoomer magazine and has been appointed--among a mere 3,000 worldwide--with the prestigious title of “Ashoka Fellow”. Such acclaim has validated the program as a “game-changing” force in social work. “The work we do is so grassroots and emotional and so right there with young people, and on the other hand it’s got great potential to change systems too,” says Leafloor-- proving that even seemingly small efforts can have big social affect.



As a teenager, himself, Leafloor had attempted to cope with the trauma and frustrations of being bullied. As such, he began regularly smoking pot and performing theft through break and enters. Quickly realizing this path could only lead to further negativity, Leafloor turned to hip-hop. Using dancing as an alternative outlet, he was able to positively channel his energy while asserting his presence and gaining respect from his peers. “I think the reason I’m so good at working with angry young men is because that was me,” he confesses. He suggests that it might be “the sense of coolness, bravado, and swagger” that comes with hip-hop, as well as the BluePrint staffs’ industry credibility, which first draws youth in; however, it is “the power of the personal story” that is most crucial in helping to foster the deeper connections for youth to relate. “The telling of one’s story,” he says “is one of the strongest healing modalities in mental health and is certainly in line with the First Nations and Aboriginal peoples’ traditions.”

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In order to establish an open, safe space of comfort and mutual respect, BluePrint staff members share their own stories with youth. “Admitting we’re human beings and vulnerable is really important. There should be no shame in a social worker admitting they went through a bout of depression. We have to lead by example,” states Leafloor. He recalls the powerful impact that has resulted when female members of his staff have shared their stories of rape, foster homes, and the suicides of loved ones. Because the women carry themselves with such strength, confidence, and positive energy, they might first be perceived as having had happy, trauma-free lives; however, once the women tell their stories “something really flips in the kids’ brains,” suggests Leafloor, “I think it resonates as real hope to young people.”

Leafloor also recounts the students’ surprise when many of the “strong, intimidating, tattooed men” of his team breakdown and openly comfort one another as they share their stories of hardship. “That’s just all the right role modelling kids need to see,” he says, “we should be sending a message



out there to young boys that strong people cry, but we raise them with the mentality ‘suck it up and be a man’ and it’s the most horrible thing you can do for mental health.” Instead, Leafloor and his team practise what they preach to promote platforms of open dialogue, not suffering in silence. “How can we tell kids to reach out for help when we can’t even admit our own humanity?” he inquires.

“EACH ONE, TEACH ONE”

It is this encouraging atmosphere of sharing, along with the creative expression of hip-hop, that continues to help youth heal, along with Leafloor and the tight-knit BluePrint team.

This sense of inclusion allows BluePrint to reach so many varied individuals, customizing their program so that no child is left behind. “We get everybody to sign up and participate,” says Leafloor, whether they’re “the most shy kids or the most disenfranchised and on the fringes... it’s not about who’s the best, it’s about each to the best of their abilities.” By using hip-top to create a space of acceptance, Leafloor has found that communities begin to “see strength in each other and collectively grow throughout the week in this transformation.”

Indeed, BluePrint’s week-long, intensive, Intergenerational Healing program seeks to expand this inclusionary mindset to stretch across generations. Aiming to connect individuals, regardless of age, the program strengthens community bonds and promotes collective healing--particularly regarding the lasting-traumas inflicted from residential schools. Because every community will have unique heritage, traditions, and experiences of trauma, Leafloor emphasizes the importance of “being respectful and humbling” in the workshop’s approach. Composed of individuals of varying cultural backgrounds, the BluePrint team tries to embody the role of “forever students” who can learn from others as they facilitate growth through hip-hop. Therefore, the team begins each project by learning and participating in the given community’s traditional ceremonies; during these moments, the staff find opportunities to develop dialogue between themselves and the group, as well as between youth and elders. “I’ll tell a story about respect and the elders might add a legend about respect,” explains Leafloor, “the elders very quickly see us as a strong ally. They get that happy, laughing, smiling children is a great starting place from which you can build.”



It was in 2006, after visiting his sister in Iqaluit, Nunavut that Leafloor--who is not Native, himself-- realized the potential of the program for helping Aboriginal communities across the country. Though he had only intended on doing the one project, the interest and need in the communities became even more apparent upon his return: “they all started calling, and our work grew in the coolest way: through word of mouth.” Frustrated by the restrictive bureaucracy of current systems, Leafloor made the difficult decision to leave his position as a Senior Abuse Investigator with Children’s Aid and undertake this new, independent project: “and now, here we are 8 years later,” he muses.

“THEY COME FOR THE HIP-HOP, THEY STAY FOR THE HEALING”

Since it arose 40 years ago, hip-hop has acquired a somewhat negative connotation from depictions of overly-emphasized egos and glorified criminal lifestyles. However, Leafloor explains that this appropriation is not in line with the constructive purpose it was initially intended for: “I think it grew out of desperation and rage... but it’s not always full of anger, but passion, and is a way of expressing yourself and making a statement of confidence,” he says. By offering platforms of music, art, dance, and fashion, the movement presents the opportunity to both represent a collective and manifest a sense of individuality. “I think the most important thing is that you can make it your own,” says Leafloor.

HEALING AS A JOURNEY NOT A DESTINATION

Within the first days of one of the previous Intergenerational Healing workshops, Pauktuutit (The National Women's Inuit Association) worked strictly with the elders and adults as BluePrint worked with the children. Throughout the day, the two separate groups would draw and write about feelings and values then swap the products across the groups. During this reflection, a series of similar ideas and beliefs would be found to span across the generational divides. "We're setting the stage for the connection in showing that they already think alike on a lot of stuff, even though they maybe don't know how to talk to each other," says Leafloor. In the final days of the workshop, they bring everyone together for a healing ceremony. During one such instance, Leafloor recalls some elders who told stories of suicide or endured abuse--many confiding for the first time. He emphasizes the power and importance of the youth having heard these brave words: "often you feel you're alone or that it's just your generation that's maligned because we swim around in our own trauma so much... and in a strange way it's comforting to know that at least you're not alone and not an anomaly." To promote these moments of hope and enlightenment, BluePrint creates an environment that's free of artificial constructs, where healing can occur organically on both a community and personal level. "It's kind of holistic, it's not like you write the definitive story around residential schools, but you start the process and it's got to start somewhere," says Leafloor. "But," he adds, "those first steps are always the scariest."

"When your world is full of chaos and you can taste that rage, listen to your own drum, let the music of life roll through you and ask yourself what art can help you heal."



With those initial intimidating steps, it is hip-hop that shatters tension and places everyone on the same equal-footing. "If we've asked the kids to do positive risk-taking doing something they've



In opposition to the "the stereotype that it's only doom and gloom," in these communities, Leafloor has seen, first-hand, the joy that exists-- specifically entrenched in the pride that comes with embracing cultural customs. He remembers a young man from Calgary, who was extremely nervous at the prospect of singing in public for the first-time, but found his confidence after practising with an elder. "When he found his voice on that final night's show it sent chills so that the hairs were sticking up on everyone's arms," he recounts, "and then, for him to feel like a hero because all his peers were supporting him as he sang traditional song was just unreal." Leafloor has also found that some of the most exciting moments of collective pride come when individuals combine the traditional, such as throat singing, and the modern, such as beat-boxing-- creating a new hybrid of sorts (in this case

never done and putting themselves out there, then we need to do that as adults." Leafloor claims that at first, the adults are just as nervous and scared as the kids are to dance publically. However, he emphasizes the importance of adults participating and showing leadership, which can also ensure sustainability following the programs completion. Leafloor describes times where even great-grandmothers will try out the role of DJ, despite having never seen or heard of it before. In sharing those human moments of laughter, differences are forgotten and generations are brought together. "People are just people," says Leafloor, "there are always commonalities and that's what makes life so exciting; that's what makes hip-hop so exciting."



"throat-boxing"). Such forms of collaboration are even being noticed on a larger-scale with the emergence and widespread popularity of groups like A Tribe Called Red, who have combined electronic music with traditional singing to propel the Electric Powwow movement. These community-level or globally-broadcasted integrations of hip-hop with Native culture function to celebrate one's heritage and can, in turn, build confidence in youth. As Leafloor notes, "the collective pride just keeps going up."

Though Stephen Leafloor found his way to healing, growth, and self-acceptance through hip-hop, he encourages youth to positively explore who they are and where they come from in their own ways: "find things that you're passionate about that are healthy," he says, "find things that give you an energy in life." Though struggling with self-identity is a universal passage of adolescence, Leafloor recognizes it can be even more challenging for Native youth, given their complicated cultural histories. "Cut yourself a break and don't stress," he urges, "believe in yourself and don't let negativity take away from you and your own great potential"--a gift he believes best flourishes from having pride in one's family, culture, heritage and, ultimately, self. As Leafloor wisely advised in a TED Talk he conducted, "when your world is full of chaos and you can taste that rage, listen to your own drum, let the music of life roll through you and ask yourself what art can help you heal."



www.blueprintforlife.ca

Terra X



HEAD OFFICE
1066 West Hastings Street, 23rd Floor
Vancouver, B.C. V6E 3X2
604.689.1749

EXPLORATION OFFICE
Geovector Management
10 Green Street, Suite 312
Nepean, Ontario K2J 3Z6
613.843.8109

INVESTOR RELATIONS
Paradox Public Relations
514.341.0408
Toll Free: 1.866.460.0408
www.terraxminerals.com