Community members, professionals capture South Side community strolling Kirk Park Syracuse, NY

PHOTO WALK EVENT

Community members, professionals capture South Side community

‘real talk’
Battle rapper Justin Makarushka explains what inspires him

Now Coming to Your TV
The Stand to appear regularly on WCNY

Special Profiles
Four people are featured in an eight-page segment in this issue

STROLLING KIRK PARK
PROFILE | Meet some special people profiled in an eight-page segment in this issue: Emma McDonald, Bobby Hudgins, Travon Burke and Dale Johnson.

FEATURES | Take a walk through the South Side, where photographers snapped a day's worth of special moments as part of The Stand's third annual Photo Walk this summer.

COMMUNITY | Read all about Kirk Park in this issue's Strolling the South Side feature. Kirk Park is a standout recreational gathering place that is rich in history.

ENTERTAINMENT | Battle rapper Justin Makarushka, known as “Real Talk,” sits down for a conversation with community correspondent Keith Muhammad about what inspires him.

Cover photography from The Stand's third annual Photo Walk by Chambang Mut

CORRECTION
The summer issue of The Stand incorrectly identified two community members in two separate stories. In the first story, on Page 8, under the headline, “Deterring Crime” — about security camera installation on the South Side — the name of Anna Morris was wrong in the story and in the photo cutline. In the second story, on Page 16, under the headline, “Flood Insurance,” Mercedes Bloodworth is the homeowner featured in the photo. She was misidentified as someone else in the photo cutline.
The summer has flown by and the start of a new semester signals new print editions of The Stand. While we’ve been on hiatus from print, we’ve been quite active these past four months.

Stories, stories and more stories have appeared online from our student staff and our community correspondents. Our correspondents teamed up again to cover Juneteenth, and they also developed a number of their own ideas into stories and reported from various events. To name just a few, The Stand reported on the “Night Out with the Coalition,” held in May, Corcoran High School’s graduation in June, the success of the resurrected ACT-SO competition that sent four Syracuse teens to nationals in July and coverage of the annual Mary Nelson Youth Day Barbecue in August.

And we officially became a nonprofit. We’re excited to have everything finalized with the state, and our board of directors is working to continue to move the project forward.

We also hosted three opportunities this summer to get people involved. In May, a journalism training session prepared community correspondents for the mass coverage in June of Syracuse’s Juneteenth celebration. And in July we held our third annual Photo Walk, this time with The Post-Standard photographer Mike Greenlar, who volunteered to guide our participants. Photos from our walk appear on Page 14. Photos also were featured on Jim Reith’s TV show, which airs weeknights at 6:30 p.m. on WCNY. While this was our first appearance on the new local talk show, it won’t be our last. We’re excited about our new partnership with WCNY, which will bring news from the South Side to TV viewers.

This month, in lieu of a workshop, The South Side Newspaper Project will volunteer our time at Home HeadQuarters’ annual Block Blitz. One of the group’s chosen locations is the 200 block of McLennan Avenue on the South Side. This is a one-day volunteer event in which hundreds of people from area schools, businesses, churches, non-profits, construction trades and more will donate their time, labor, money and materials to help improve homes in the city. On Friday, Sept. 14, volunteers will work from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. alongside homeowners. They will paint, plant, repair, clean and do everything else in between. Volunteers can come for one hour or all day as individuals or as part of a team. We welcome anyone to join The Stand team. You’ll receive a free Stand T-shirt, and you can even help tell the stories of the residents on this block. We’ll provide pens, notepads and cameras for anyone interested in reporting on the event that day.

So we hope you’ll join us Sept. 14 in helping to make the South Side even more beautiful. For now, turn the page for some special personality profiles. You will meet people in the community who are doing amazing things.

Ashley Kang
Do you need help with your breast cancer bills?

The Saint Agatha Foundation has established funds at area hospitals and medical providers to provide financial support for breast cancer patients in Onondaga, Cortland, Cayuga, Madison, Oneida, and Oswego Counties, New York. The Foundation was established by Laurie Mezzalingua, a breast cancer patient for 12 years. Her vision was to provide financial assistance to those who cannot afford their disease.

The following costs can be covered:
- Treatment, procedures, or testing
- Prescription co-pays
- Medication not covered by insurance
- Office visits or procedural co-pays
- Wound care systems
- Breast reconstruction
- Lymphedema sleeves
- Alternative treatments not covered by insurance
- Transportation to and from treatment
- Prostheses
- Post-surgical camisoles, bras
- Wigs
- Wellness needs

We can help you.

saintagathafoundation.org | (888) 878-7900
Designed to meet a critical need in the South Side neighborhood, the 3,000-square-foot grocery store will feature a wide array of products, as well as a café with delicious, healthy treats.

Syracuse University joined with many local partners to make this vital resource a reality. For more information, contact the Syracuse University South Side Initiative Office at 315.443.1916.

SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY: Scholarship in Action
SURVIVOR: EMMA MCDONALD
South Sider shares positive outlook on life with those around her
“Cancer has made me grow”

By Laura Liera
Urban Affairs reporter

Hospital volunteer credits faith and church members for helping her face cancer

There are few age lines on her face and there is a brightness in her eyes that makes you feel warm and comfortable. She wears a silver necklace with a cross. And when the words “breast cancer” are brought up, she looks up and thanks God for allowing her to live.

At 73 years old, Emma McDonald is a recent breast cancer survivor going on her third year of being cancer-free. It’s not a new illness in her life. Her father, her husband — and most currently, her daughter — have been diagnosed with it.

McDonald, who moved from Birmingham, Ala., to Syracuse, found sanctuary in Hopps Memorial Church many years ago, with the death of her father in 1964.

“I was so angry with God because I didn’t understand why he had taken a great man who was loved and took care of his family,” McDonald said. Her father gave up to lung cancer, and that year a church member turned to God for help.

“I purchased a pair of house slippers … and there was a little tack at the bottom of that slipper and it pricked his foot, towards his heel, and he never did tell me it had become inflamed,” she said.

Because of that, doctors at Crouse Hospital discovered his cancer and confirmed he wouldn’t tolerate treatment this time.

“My husband told the doctor that he knew if they could do anything, they would save him, but that his life was no longer in their hands,” McDonald said. “He said he was ready and had lived a good life next to his children and wife.”

He died in November 2004.

In the summer of 2009, McDonald visited the doctor because she felt something under her left breast. Although she went through the examinations the doctor recommended and got checked by the breast surgeon, they found nothing.

After returning from a family reunion in Atlanta, McDonald insisted to the doctors that she needed to get a needle biopsy of her left breast.

“Dr. William Schu did the needle biopsy on Monday and told me he would call me Friday for the results,” McDonald said. “He called me Thursday.”

McDonald was at Chase Bank on University Avenue when she received the phone call. “I can remember his voice so vividly,” she said. “He said, ‘Your suspicion was right, the fluid came out cancerous.’” She opted for a mastectomy because she didn’t want to run the risk of the cancer recurring. “I am a black woman, in a certain age group, and I knew the best decision was to get the mastectomy instead of the lumpectomy,” she said.

Although she was living with cancer, McDonald didn’t get frightened or agitated.

“I thought to myself, ‘Emma, you’re going to go through the storm. You’ve been through many storms by now, and you’re going to get through it,’” she said. “And I did, without shedding a tear throughout it all.”

McDonald’s inner strength played a crucial role in 1979, when the soup kitchen at Hopps was launched.

“We had a lot of backlash from people in the church that didn’t want to allow people from the streets to come into our church to receive food because they smelled,” she said. “And so I stood up in front of that lectern and told them that these people were God’s children, regardless of how they smelled or how they looked.”

From that day on, the soup kitchen has been serving community members hot meals in a brown paper bag.

Although the word “cancer” makes people’s heart drop, McDonald has learned to embrace and learn from her own experience with the illness.

“I have more compassion for people than I used to. Going through cancer has made me grow and it’s made me stronger and wiser to do what you can do now, today, not tomorrow or the next month.”

NAME: Emma McDonald

AGE: 73

COMMUNITY PASSION:
Volunteers for Upstate University Hospital at Community General. She also reads to first- and second-graders at Dr. King School.

PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE:
“Live life to the fullest, like it’s your last day on Earth because it isn’t guaranteed. Live day by day and give love and joy to everyone. That is what it’s all about.”

MY FAVORITE THING:
“I love bowling. Prior to having surgery I used to be in a league. Just being able to enjoy a night with friends and laughing is priceless.”

WHY THE SOUTH SIDE?
“When I came to Syracuse, my aunt lived on the South Side. The South Side had the big homes, the manicured lawns. And the house I live in now and the house next door belonged to the Hubert family and they were a very influential family. It said that the South Side was very prestigious. And it’s coming back to that.”

MEET ME ON THE SOUTH SIDE:
“Most of my time I’m here at Hopps Church.”

> Portrait of Emma McDonald. | Hannah L Cordell, Staff Photo
BOBBY HUDGINS
South Side churchgoer gives back to his home community

By | Aaron Pelc
Urban Affairs reporter

Deacon and his wife return home to the South Side to bless the community around them.

Bobby Hudgins hasn’t lived on the South Side since 1997. But it’s still home.

“Home” is New Hope Missionary Baptist Church on West Lafayette Avenue, a church he’s attended since 1973.

“We’ve got roots here,” he said of himself and his wife, Mary, “so we keep coming here every Sunday morning.”
Hudgins is chairman of the deacon board at the church, and he drives the church van on Sundays to pick up parishioners who need a lift. He forms closer connections with church members that way.

“When you’re driving you get to know people, and talk to them, and I enjoy it,” he said.

One Sunday last spring, for instance, he learned that one parishioner, Louise Rawlinson, is from Savannah, Ga., near Mary’s hometown.

Rawlinson has been going to the church for six years. She said she depends on the van service.

“It means a lot to me. I don’t have any transportation otherwise, and if the van didn’t pick me up it would be tough,” she said. “Except somebody else might be coming my way at the time. They may pick me up, but this picks me up on time. It’s convenient.”

“Helping other people makes you feel good,” Hudgins simply says.

One of his favorite memories was June of 2011, when he drove 12 or 13 people — there are usually just a few passengers on an average Sunday — on an annual trip to a church in Rochester.

“When you’re driving for three hours, you get to open up more. When people are inside the church sometimes they don’t open up,” he said.

The passengers are from all around Syracuse, not just the South Side.

Among Hudgins’ other duties as a deacon: serving communion, attending Bible study, and visiting the sick. During the week he works for Gianelli Sausage. On Sundays he gets to church two and a half hours early to take out the van.

“It’s one way of giving back, because so many people have helped me in so many ways,” he said. “One way I can give back is by giving up some of my time.”

Mary Hudgins said she was hesitant about Bobby becoming a deacon in 1994, but now she’s glad.

“Now that he is a deacon I’ve moved more toward him now, and I support him, and I like what he’s doing because I like the change I’ve seen in him, because I have a lot more respect for him than I did when we were younger,” she said. “He’s more settled, a much more settled gentleman, a mature, settled gentleman.”

“I wasn’t always Deacon Hudgins,” he says. “Like a lot of young people I did things that I shouldn’t have done, and a lot of people sat me down and talked to me and kind of made me see that what I was doing wasn’t right. They kind of helped me out. I’m just returning the favor.”

Profile

NAME: Bobby Hudgins

AGE: 60

JOB: Church deacon, chairman of deacon board.

PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE:
“Treat people like you would like to be treated.”

MY FAVORITE THING:
“Spending time with my wife, going out walking with my wife, because I’m busy.”

WHY THE SOUTH SIDE?
“I’ve been coming here since 1973. We have roots here and we know everybody.”
ATHLETE: TRAVON BURKE

Corcoran grad finds his footing as college football player
“Keep working hard”

By | Josh Wetmore
Urban Affairs reporter

Syracuse University running back balances course work and football with help from coach

Travon Burke’s grades started slipping during this past spring semester at Syracuse University. Without good enough grades, the Corcoran High School grad wouldn’t be able to play football. And with spring football practices starting, making up for lost ground was looking like a daunting task.

Then Burke’s running backs coach, Tyrone Wheatley, stepped in.

“He told me to call my father and we set up a meeting. Then he took me out of spring ball so I could get my grades up,” Burke said.

Coach Wheatley’s special interest in his success isn’t something Burke expected. That’s because Burke is a walk-on player for Syracuse, which means he isn’t a scholarship athlete and might not receive the same attention from the program as other members of the team.

“That really showed me that he cared. Another coach wouldn’t have done that. They would’ve just let me fail,” Burke said.

Thanks in part to Wheatley’s help, Burke is not only back on track with his grades but is also practicing with the team again. The sophomore running back said he thinks he might even get some playing time this season.

While things look good right now, Burke’s journey to Syracuse has been anything but easy.

Burke said that during his junior year at Corcoran, Syracuse University started to recruit him. However, right around the time former head coach Greg Robinson was fired, and current head coach Doug Marrone was hired, Burke stopped hearing from the school. Actually, he stopped hearing from any schools.

Even though Burke, then a linebacker, finished his senior year as an All-CNY player and was named the Defensive MVP for the Upstate All-Star team in the 2009 Upstate vs. Downstate game, he never received a single scholarship offer.

“I’m not sure at all,” Burke said about why recruiting interest tailed off. “I still don’t know why.”

After spending a year playing football for Milford Academy, it took a little help from his family to get Burke into the world of college football.

“Coach Wheatley coached my brother at Eastern Michigan, and my brother called him,” Burke said about how he started playing for Syracuse. “Coach Wheatley was happy to say yes, and he met with me and my brother.”

Even after Burke joined the team things still weren’t easy. As a freshman, Burke started as a linebacker, but as a young walk-on he said he was used more for tackling practice than anything else.

“I got mad and started running people over,” Burke said. Then the coaches took notice and moved him to running back.

Burke is currently third on the Syracuse depth chart at fullback and is trying to let players at his old high school know what it takes to reach their dreams.

“I tell them every time I see them, ‘You have to just keep working hard,’ ” Burke said. “ ‘Stop hanging out with the wrong crowd. If they’re not trying to do what you’re trying to do, then stay away from them.’ ”

Burke said he also tries to emphasize something his parents taught him.

“School is first. They have to do well in school,” Burke said.

That is a lesson Burke knows he needs to keep in mind as well. After his academic struggles in the spring, Burke isn’t taking anything lightly, particularly because he knows the alternatives.

“I look back at the people I grew up with and see everything they could’ve had, and it’s gone,” Burke said about what motivates him to keep going. “Some people just died, some people are in jail. I go home and I just see the same people doing the same thing.”

It’s exactly that fate Burke plans to avoid.

“My first plan is to graduate,” Burke said about his future plans. “After that, if football is still here, then I’d love to do it. But if not, I just want to be a successful person that can take care of his family.” With the support he has from his family and coach Wheatley, Burke said accomplishing those goals comes down to one thing.

“You have to work hard from Day One.”

NAME: Travon Burke
AGE: 20
ACTIVITY: Football

PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE:
“I try to take everything seriously because I’ve seen a lot of people who haven’t taken what they have seriously and they blew every chance they had to be successful in life.”

MY FAVORITE THING:
“My family. They make me happy and they make me try to be the best I can be.”

WHY THE SOUTH SIDE?
“That’s where my family lives.”

MEET ME ON THE SOUTH SIDE:
“Everywhere, because I have friends everywhere.”

> Portrait of Travon Burke on the practice field at Manley Field House. | Josh Wetmore, Staff Photo
COACH: DALE JOHNSON
Volunteer draws on his past to change the future for South Side youth
“This was the right thing to do”

By | Alexandra Hitzler
Urban Affairs reporter

Coach helps to provide South Side youth with playing time and sports equipment

Coach Dale Johnson called in his youth soccer team after a Sunday afternoon practice this spring, as they begged for more time on the field. “Just 10 more minutes!” said Prem Baidya, 14, a member of Johnson’s under-16 soccer team.

Johnson, a volunteer youth soccer coach and founder of Tillie’s Touch, a nonprofit organization that supplies children with sports and school supplies, has been working with kids from the South and North sides of Syracuse since 2009.

Johnson said he had been volunteering to help kids for years in his hometown of East Syracuse, but recognized the need for programs to help other kids as well.

“Life can be tough for kids in the city,” Johnson said. “They’re faced with a lot of adversity, so when I saw that there was a need out there to help these kids out, I decided that this was the right thing to do.”

Johnson’s organization is named after his daughter, Abby, whose middle name is Tillie. It provides children with school supplies and sports equipment financed through donations. The donations are distributed through community hubs like the Southwest Community Center. Johnson also uses the donations to equip his youth soccer teams with cleats, uniforms and other essentials that they need to play.

Johnson said he is passionate about helping kids in need because of the hardships of his own childhood.

“I grew up in a household that had domestic violence,” Johnson said. “… Sports became an escape for me. No matter what bad things were happening, I could escape and play ball for a few hours, and I want to bring that opportunity of escape to these kids, as well.”

Johnson said he hopes to keep them focused on their futures.

“I want to give kids everything they need to be able to participate and be passionate about sports,” Johnson said. “I love to see that I’m coaching kids whose lives revolve around sports, because that means they’re putting their time into sports and not anything destructive. I don’t think any good can happen from just sitting at home all the time.”

Johnson said because of his past, guiding and taking care of children has become an important part of his life, especially within his own family.

“One of my favorite things to do is spend time with my family and hang out with my kids,” Johnson said. “We love to watch sports together and go to SU basketball games. Family time is very important.”

Johnson said his two children — Abigale, 15, and Matthew, 11 — have shared his interest in sports and have even become involved with his youth teams.

“My daughter Abby plays on my u-16 team and she’s really become like a sister to these kids,” Johnson said. “It’s great to have my own kids involved in my work.”

Johnson said the most important lesson that he emphasizes to his kids is to be passionate about whatever they choose to do.

“I always tell my kids and the kids on my team to always give 100 percent,” Johnson said.

“It would be great to have them be as passionate as I am about sports and community work, but as long as they’re passionate about what they’re doing, I’m happy.”

Johnson said he feels lucky to take part in children’s lives and is very happy with the success of his efforts.

“The interest in this program has not stopped growing since it started,” Johnson said.

Johnson said he plans to set up more sports teams and youth programs in the coming months. There are currently 30 to 40 kids participating on Johnson’s soccer teams and he said he expects that number to double by next year.

Since starting the program, he said he’s helped nearly 500 students.

“We have had a lot of success with Tillie’s Touch and our sports programs,” Johnson said. “I have no intent to stop anytime soon.”

NAME: Dale Johnson

AGE: 41

COMMUNITY PASSION: “I am a produce manager at Nice ‘n’ Easy in East Syracuse, but I am also passionate about my Tillie’s Touch.”

PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE: “Always give 100 percent to whatever you do.”

MY FAVORITE THING: “Watch sports with my kids on the weekends.”

WHY THE SOUTH SIDE? “I feel a connection to helping kids on the South Side whose lives might not be that easy because I can identify with them because of my own childhood.”

MEET ME ON THE SOUTH SIDE: “I like going to the Southwest Community Center and handing out sports equipment and jerseys to kids because they really love it.”

HOW YOU CAN HELP

Tillie’s Touch is looking for donations of gently used softball, baseball, soccer, lacrosse, golf, tennis, football or basketball items. Please contact Dale Johnson: (315) 254-8569, email tilliestouch@aol.com or visit Tilliestouch.org

> Portrait of Dale Johnson. | Lena Budd, Staff Photo
The Stand’s third annual Photo Walk opened with a photo lesson taught by Mike Greenlar, staff photographer at The Post-Standard. He volunteered his time to provide pointers and guidance throughout the day’s event, held July 21.

The walk welcomed eight photographers of various skill levels and took photographers down South Salina Street, through neighborhoods to Kirk Park and back to the South Side Innovation Center, where everyone met to share their images. Greenlar, shown at right taking a photo, encouraged participants to take a variety of shots and to have fun interacting with the community. He made the experience even more interactive not only for the photo walk participants, but also for local residents by bringing along a Polaroid camera and distributing Polaroid portraits to willing models.

Also, while on the walk, photographers came across the Race Against Obesity being held at Kirk Park and organized by Common Councilor Khalid Bey. The walk/race had been organized to bring awareness to the issue of obesity.

Even more photos are shared online at www.mysouthsidestand.com in slideshows
Community and city work together to reinvigorate and upgrade historic park

Kirk Park stands out among recreational parks in Syracuse because of its rich history, and people in the neighborhood have set out to rehabilitate the park from the ground up.

Situated near Onondaga Creek, the park originally was known as Kirkwood Driving Park. It was founded around 1890 and hosted horse and bicycle races at its half-mile racetrack, according to the Syracuse Parks and Recreation website.

Syracuse City Recreational Aide Sheila Jones has witnessed the evolution of the park for the 13 years she’s been working at the Seals Community Center. Jones said the biggest change she’s seen at the park in the past three to five years has been the brand-new football field.

“When they did that field, they started to revitalize this park,” Jones said.

The field now sports a large scoreboard, bleachers with an enclosed viewing booth and a fence surrounding the field. But the community didn’t stop there.

The Kirk Park Association was formed within the past year. Members are people in the neighborhood who want to have a firsthand say in the grassroots process of rejuvenating the park.

Seals Community Center Director Denise Moore is a member of this newly formed group. It partners with the Syracuse City Parks and Recreation Department on many of the park’s renovation projects.

“We make decisions to improve the appearance and quality of the park,” Moore said. “Making it more community friendly and making sure park needs that are not yet met are met.”

This spirit of community was evident in 2010, when a 15-year-old gunman was seen in the park area during a Kirk Park Colts football game. Babette Baker, vice president of the KPA, remembers the positive community reaction after the incident.

“The parents value having an organization (like the Colts),” Baker said. “They really rallied around the kids at that time, the police were wonderful working with the community, and we haven’t had any problems since.”

The association receives much of its money for renovation projects through grants, as well as through a city fund set up to rehabilitate community parks and landmarks, Baker said. She spoke at an association meeting in July, which was focused on how to get the community more involved in park events.

Several major projects have been proposed or are under way at the park, including a $25,000 stone dust walking path that should be completed next summer, and...
an ongoing planting initiative, which includes community gardens and trees.

Vincent Love, president of 100 Black Men, has become part of this planting initiative. The men and boys in the group have done recent gardening around the park. 100 Black Men is a national organization designed to mentor young African-American men in both the academic and social realm, according to the group’s website. The Syracuse chapter includes men and boys from the Kirk Park area.

“We want to help our young men to see that this is their community,” Love said, “and to encourage them to take ownership and be willing to do some footwork to help improve it.”

Love said members of his group have worked at Kirk Park several times in the past year, doing work like clearing brush and planting.

The community has also been proactive in the planning of the park’s renovations, said Parks and Recreation Deputy Commissioner John Walsh.

“It’s a matter of the city and community looking at the park and saying, ‘Yeah, we need this or that,’” Walsh said. “They’re very vocal, and it lets everyone know that they’re there and they’re vibrant.”

Walsh is optimistic about revitalization of the park.

“That area’s got a lot of stereotypes, and they’re not true — it’s a beautiful park,” Walsh said.

“I look at it as the main thing for finding out what’s going on on this side of town. I like to keep in touch with who’s performing.”


For more information, contact Babette Baker at (315) 448-8173 or email the Kirk Park Association at kirkparkassoc@gmail.com.

For more information on Kirk Park meetings and other South Side events, visit mysouthsidestand.com for our online calendar.
UPCOMING SHOW

‘A CHANCE TO BE SEEN’ VARIETY SHOW

When: 7 p.m. Friday, Sept. 14

Where: Onondaga Community College, Storer Auditorium, 4585 W. Seneca Turnpike

More details: The show will spotlight local artists desiring “A Chance to Be Seen.” Performances will include music, dance, step teams and spoken word. Real Talk will perform an original piece created specifically for this fundraising event. Proceeds benefit the Donnie L. Herring OCC Scholarship Fund.

Cost: Tickets are $15 each or two for $20, if purchased in advance; $20 at the door. Ask about group discounts.

More Info.: Call (315) 278-4572 for additional information or to purchase tickets in advance or visit www.achancetobeseen.eventbrite.com

By | Keith Muhammad
Community correspondent

He says he treats rapping like playing chess:
Know your opponents, study their next move

J ustin Makarushka, also known as battle rapper “Real Talk” and “Justin The Lyricist,” has been called one of the most intricate writers in upstate New York’s battle rap movement. Justin is best known for battling in Grind Time Now, the World’s Largest Hip Hop Battle League. He is one of three Upstate New York Division’s most popular rappers. The others are Dirt and Ivan the Great. All three are from Syracuse.

The trio refers to themselves as “The Three-Headed Monster” because of fan recognition.

“They walk into the joint [and] people know who they are. That’s the kind of impact they’ve had,” said Just One, general manager and host of “Grind Time Upstate New York.” “They’ve battled in nine states and 14 cities.”

Real Talk has garnered an extensive rap career in just two years. His 20 or so online battles have a combined viewing of one-quarter million hits. He has performed as far south as Florida and as far west as California, and his eyes are set on expanding his territory into Canada. His fan base continues to grow due to the time he has devoted to honing his craft — called grindin’.

The Stand’s community correspondent Keith Muhammad had the opportunity to talk with Real Talk during the “Day of Reckoning” battle rap event held over the summer. He spoke candidly about his goals, his love for writing lyrics, his competitiveness and how he shines brightest when his back is against the wall.

Keith Muhammad: What inspired you?
Real Talk: I started in high school. My homeboy was tellin’ me he rapped. He said, ‘I got this little setup

Together they battled over 400 rappers and won big.

The Stand’s community correspondent Keith Muhammad had the opportunity to talk with Real Talk during the “Day of Reckoning” battle rap event held over the summer. He spoke candidly about his goals, his love for writing lyrics, his competitiveness and how he shines brightest when his back is against the wall.

Keith Muhammad: What inspired you?
Real Talk: I started in high school. My homeboy was tellin’ me he rapped. He said, ‘I got this little setup

Together they battled over 400 rappers and won big.

The Stand’s community correspondent Keith Muhammad had the opportunity to talk with Real Talk during the “Day of Reckoning” battle rap event held over the summer. He spoke candidly about his goals, his love for writing lyrics, his competitiveness and how he shines brightest when his back is against the wall.

Keith Muhammad: What inspired you?
Real Talk: I started in high school. My homeboy was tellin’ me he rapped. He said, ‘I got this little setup

Together they battled over 400 rappers and won big.

The Stand’s community correspondent Keith Muhammad had the opportunity to talk with Real Talk during the “Day of Reckoning” battle rap event held over the summer. He spoke candidly about his goals, his love for writing lyrics, his competitiveness and how he shines brightest when his back is against the wall.

Keith Muhammad: What inspired you?
Real Talk: I started in high school. My homeboy was tellin’ me he rapped. He said, ‘I got this little setup

Together they battled over 400 rappers and won big.

The Stand’s community correspondent Keith Muhammad had the opportunity to talk with Real Talk during the “Day of Reckoning” battle rap event held over the summer. He spoke candidly about his goals, his love for writing lyrics, his competitiveness and how he shines brightest when his back is against the wall.

Keith Muhammad: What inspired you?
Real Talk: I started in high school. My homeboy was tellin’ me he rapped. He said, ‘I got this little setup

Together they battled over 400 rappers and won big.
on the computer at the crib. You should come through.’ So I went and saw how he did it. I was intrigued. I love music. I said, ‘Let me see if I can do this.’

**KM:** How did you get involved in the battle rap movement?

**RT:** I entered a 32-man tournament on a site called letsbeat.com. I won $200 and CDs full of beats. It’s funny because one of the dudes in letsbeat.com blew up and became one of the top dudes in Grind Time. He said, ‘You should try this.’ I said, ‘Naw.’ It’s one thing to be online just rappin’ in the comfort of your own home, but to get in front of mad people with a camera. At first, I wasn’t with it.

**KM:** Obviously changed your mind. How did you become one of the top rappers in the Upstate New York Division?

**RT:** Grind Time decided to have a subdivision called the Upstate New York Division in Syracuse. [Friends that were involved] said, “Yo, you too nice. You need to just come in here and take a battle.’ I battled in Utica against this dude named Martini. I obliterated him in his own city. [Over time] my battles came up, and people were giving them good responses. It hasn’t been overnight. It’s been a constant progression.

**KM:** Where did you get the name Real Talk?

**RT:** From my peers. We would be talkin’ about certain subjects. I would say something that’s so real. They would say, ‘That’s real talk right there.’ As time went on, it just stuck. So, I use it as my rap moniker.

**KM:** Define grindin’?

**RT:** Grindin’ is the universal work ethic. With battle rap, it’s a lot of deadlines. You got to have X amount of material at X amount of time, and you have to have it known, memorized and ready to go when the time comes. It’s like doin’ homework. You got an assignment. You got to grind it out.

**KM:** When you are getting ready to battle, do you study your opponent?

**RT:** Yes. I study them and look at the game tapes. I see his strengths and weaknesses, what he tends to do, and his patterns in every battle. I try to study his style and come up with a counter attack. I know he’s gonna do the same. Battle [rap] is like a chess game. You’ve got to literally study your opponent, write and try to out bar what he’s comin’ with.

**KM:** Where do you see yourself going in the battle rap movement?

**RT:** One of my goals is for my talent to take me places. The battle rap community is international. My homeboy, Ivan, got invited to Australia of all places. They just opened a Grind Time division in South Africa. I’m using the battle rap community and the publicity to promote myself as an emcee, as a brand, to promote my name. I’m trying to get a recording deal. Battle rap is definitely a good field to be in right now. Especially for a cat like me; I love writing lyrics.

**KM:** Do you have any advice for a young person just starting out?

**RT:** Stay true to your originality and take time to hone your craft.

**KM:** Talk about your song, “LETTERS-Free Style.”

**RT:** [He recites a stanza from the song] “LETTERS. It seems speaking is E.Z. [easy], but lyricist have to be D, double E, P [D.E.E.P.]. All I can do is become the best I can B [be], down to the end — like W, X, Y and Z. LETTERS.” People think that it is easy, but if you want to be a lyricist you gotta dig deep under the surface. You can’t be one-dimensional. You gotta convey thoughts in things that are not seen … that brings out and … sparks something in other people.
Healthy Families offers home visits and MANY other services. Ask us about signing up!

Call Healthy Families at 435-2000 or visit: www.onhealthyfamilies.com