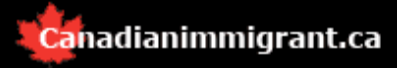


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Celebrity role models inspire young dreamers

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LESLIE FERENC
STAFF REPORTER

Creating beats is like painting a canvas – each one is a colour.

And with microphone in hand, 10-year-old Atul proved he was the Picasso of the hip hop set as he layered sound upon sound creating his own masterpiece.

"I got to learn new things and make great beats and cool sounds," said the Grade 5 student who was among dozens of kids, including his sister Priya, 8, celebrating the launch of Black History Month.

Saturday's event at North York Central Library was organized by Youth Assisting Youth. The agency matches volunteers and positive role models, age 16-29, in a one-to-one relationship with younger "at risk" kids, many from Toronto's 13 priority neighbourhoods.

Participants marked the occasion with some of Toronto's hottest young celebrities including Sean Mauricette, 29, known to his fans as Subliminal. A jack of all creative trades, Mauricette is a beat boxer, DJ, lyricist, hip hop artist, producer, and motivational speaker. He's also got a degree in architecture from the University of Toronto. Mauricette's message to young people like Atul is that education is an important part of fulfilling dreams in the entertainment industry. "I'm showing them there is a balance – that you can be an architect and a hip hop artist," said Mauricette.

International supermodel Stacey McKenzie, runway coach and a judge on the popular reality show *Canada's Next Top Model* and *America's Next Top Model*, had her audience riveted as she talked about climbing to the top.

It took years and plenty of determination to make it in the competitive field of modelling, she said. Her career has been an important stepping-stone to new dreams. She is CEO of her own modelling firm, Walk This Way and is working in television. It has also opened the door to mentoring others.

"It's important to be very persistent," she said. "It's important to follow your dream and not let anyone or anything get in your way. But you have to go the right way."

Khyle Matthews, 13, a budding singer from Markham who is also considering a career as a teacher, got the message loud and clear: "If you work hard, it pays off," she said adding despite McKenzie's fame, "she's very down to earth ... she's a regular person. I learned a lot."

Priya Ramanujam and Adrian McKenzie, co-founders and co-publishers of *Urbanology Magazine* said by sharing their experiences they hope to inspire young people like themselves. Their magazine is the first and only Canadian urban lifestyle publication sold on mainstream newsstands.

"We're helping young people understand what it takes to get to their reality and make dreams come true," said Ramanujam.

This is the first Black History Month conference organized by Youth Assisting Youth but certainly not the last said the agency's managing director, Grant Peckford. "We felt it would be significant given the diversity of our clients," he said of the event. "And to know what kids need, you need to know who they are."