

In a conference room at Rutgers' Office of Television and Radio (OTR), field producer and senior editor Michael Pinnix stands before a group of streetwise teenagers, trying to get them to discuss the lyrics for their rap video. Pinnix, sensing that he's losing the attention of some of the group, goes on the offensive.

"What would you pick to study in college?" Pinnix suddenly asks a sullen young man who has his head buried in the table.

"Basketball," the young man mutters, still looking down.

"Basketball!" Pinnix says incredulously. "You can't study basketball. You might go to college on a basketball scholarship, but you still have to pick a major, a subject to fall back on in case you can't make a living playing basketball."

From the back of the room, audio engineer Frank Brown, who has been standing anonymously near the door, strides forward to double-team the young man, who still looks uncon-

vinced. "Maybe you could pick physical education to be your major," he suggests with authority. "And if y'all want to get really ambitious, you can pick a minor, too. That makes it even better when you look for a job. You can maybe get 'the man' to put a few extra zeroes in your paycheck."

The aspiring basketball star and his 17 classmates are kids who have all run into trouble with the law. Now, they're serving sentences at Monmouth Day and Liberty Park, two juvenile residential detention facilities in New Jersey. But every other Thursday for 14 weeks, the teenagers and their counselors come to OTR to work on a rap video that the kids wrote, filmed, acted, and produced. Along the way, they learn much more than how to hold a camera or edit a film sequence.

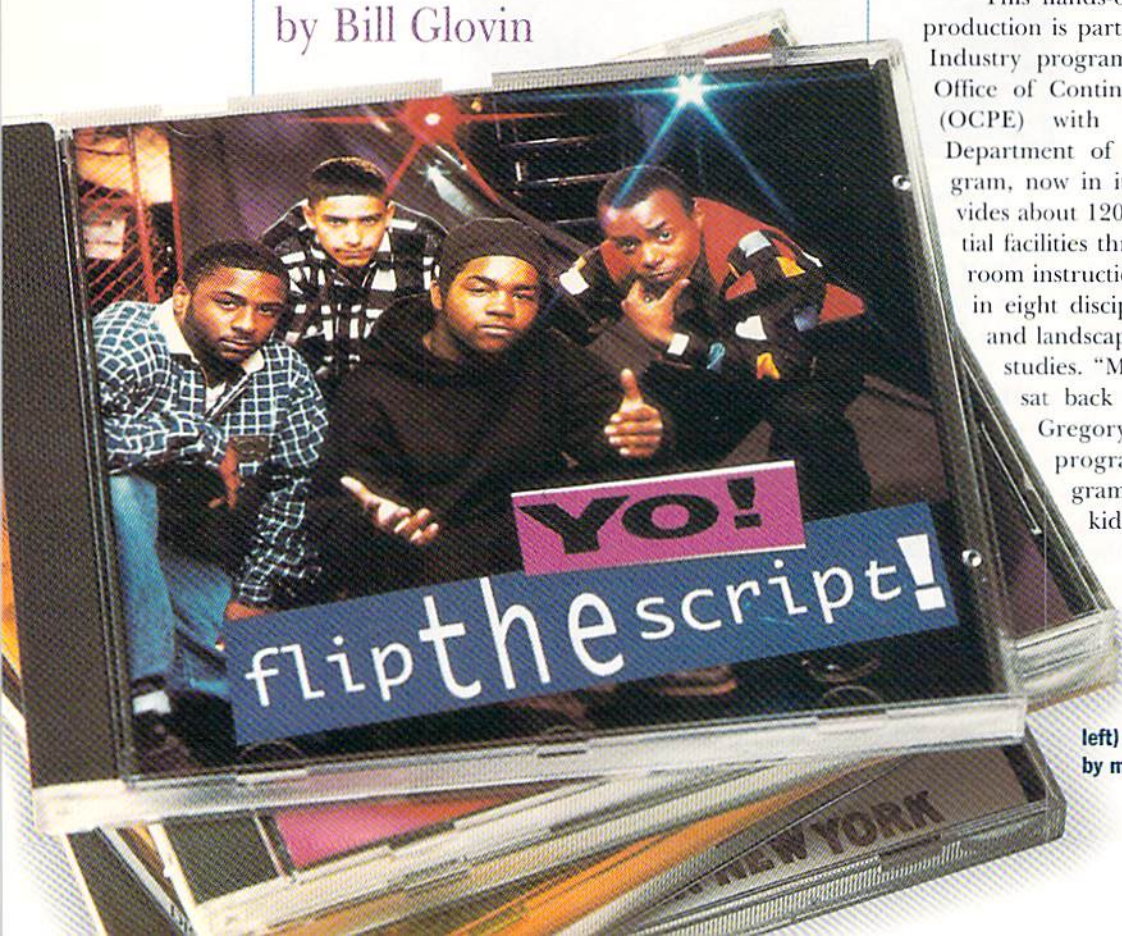
In today's session, Brown, who has worked for WNET/Channel 13 as well as a number of recording artists, and Pinnix do their best to counterpunch the kids' charge that absentee parenting led them down the road to incarceration. "You can't be blaming everyone else for your problems," Brown tells them. "And you can't just say, 'I'm gonna do better.' You've got to take advantage of situations like this. In the end, it's your life—not your fathers', not your brothers', not your friends'."

Before the group splits up to practice vocals and learn about the equipment, Pinnix notices that some of the kids look aloof or undecided. "No one's chillin' in the back," he announces. "Everyone's gonna contribute in one way or another. This is *your* project."

This hands-on experience with television production is part of the Careers in the Green Industry program run by the Cook College Office of Continuing Professional Education (OCPE) with support from the state Department of Human Services. The program, now in its fourth year, annually provides about 120 at-risk kids from 20 residential facilities throughout the state with classroom instruction and real-world experience in eight disciplines, including horticulture and landscaping, theater arts, and animal studies. "Most of these kids have never sat back and dreamed before," says Gregory Neverson, OCPE's senior program coordinator. "Our programs are eye openers; we show kids what they can accomplish."

In Rutgers' television studios, troubled teenagers discover the potential outside the streets and inside themselves.

by Bill Glovin



The lyrics to "Flip the Script" encourage teens to break from crime and strike out in new directions. Rappers George, Steve, Thomas, and Willie (from left) were part of a team that did it by making a video for the song.

At last spring's graduation ceremony, which is designed in part to show off the work of the program, their rap video on drug prevention drew a sustained ovation. You could feel their pride."

OTR was brought aboard by director Kim Manning-Lewis after she saw the program at work in other departments. Manning-Lewis, who has known Pinnix since their days as members of a broadcast association in Pittsburgh, knew he would be a perfect fit for the job. "Michael had always worked well with our interns and other young people who have come to OTR," she says. "He also has experience working with teenaged boys through his church, and he understands minority kids." Pinnix recruited Brown, whom he had met when they both worked on "Inside Trenton," a public-affairs program coproduced by OTR and WNET/Channel 13. Pinnix also enlists the help of OTR personnel and other volunteers to provide technical assistance and motivation. The first session included a reflective talk by Clyde Briggs, who spent 17 years at Rahway Penitentiary and is a founding member of the Scared Straight Program, which brings troubled teens inside prisons to show them what life behind bars is really like.

This group of aspiring filmmakers—Pinnix and Brown's second—wrote a rap called "Flip the Script," which espouses beating a life of crime and becoming a mentor for others. "Flip the script/It's simple and plain," it instructs. "Or watch your life drip down the drain." In the first four sessions, Pinnix assigned lyric writing, storyboarding, and the memorization of technical terms; the teenagers then took their assignments back to the detention centers and worked them out before the next session. After the song and script were written, the kids recorded vocal tracks, learned and practiced their parts, and filmed three video segments in the studio and at a nearby playground. They then produced the final, edited video.

The kids might have done all the work, but Pinnix was the final arbiter of what made the cut. "They don't always like it, but I ultimately choose what goes in," he says. "I tell them: 'If you think something belongs, sell it to me.' They need to learn that's the way it works in the real world." At a graduation ceremony, each was given their own copy of the video, which includes five minutes of credits. Those five minutes contain an important

lesson for the kids: For every title that scrolls across the screen, Pinnix tells them, in the real world "someone's getting paid. That's a job."

To a large extent, the project's success is tied to Pinnix's and Brown's abilities to speak the language of the inner city, the only form of communication many in the group understand. In today's session, Brown rattles off the names of a half-dozen rap and reggae artists he's worked with—Ziggye, Grand Puba, Super Cat, Chubb Rock—and the kids are impressed. He exaggerates and embellishes, using rhetorical, hard-hitting questions in a cocky, rhythmic patter that gains the kids' trust. Later, in more

subdued tones, Brown explains his act: "The only way to reach these kids is to speak to them on their level. But you also need to make them understand that when you get into the real world, 'jive' and 'rap' won't cut it. They need to learn to speak like people outside their world. We're not asking them not to speak their language, just to know when to turn it on and off."

Pinnix emphasizes that the classroom phase of the project, although not as glamorous as its working phase, is a necessary but difficult part of the process. "These kids need to know how we're going to organize things and the basics about the sophisticated equipment they are about to use," he says. That information must be given in a disciplined classroom atmosphere, a setting that many of these kids have little experience—or patience—with. "Again, it gets back to understanding that in the real world, people require that you first sit there and listen. You have to complete point A before you get to points B and C."

While assessing the kids' performances and attitudes during a break, the dynamic duo of Pinnix and Brown say that, just like last spring's group, many of these teenagers display lots of intelligence and even rare talent. "One kid thinks he's Francis Ford Coppola," jokes Brown. Although they feel that they're making a small difference, they can't help but feel frustrated knowing that there are too few programs like this one and too many troubled youths. Says Pinnix: "What really shut us both up in that classroom was that one kid who asked, 'How come we have to get into trouble before we get to do something like this?'" □

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the glamour of making a video is the first thing that captures the kids' attention, but Michael Pinnix (at left) makes sure they learn that patience and self-discipline is essential to any job—no matter how cool.