

1Hood Media



A dynamic Pittsburgh collective uses the arts and activism to promote social justice and help liberate individuals and the community.

By LaMont Jones Jr.

Shyheim Banks, an up-and-coming hip-hop artist in Pittsburgh, learns of 1Hood Media’s Artist Academy. It’s 2018, and he’s “looking for a way to engage my art on another level.”

The 21-year-old begins working for the academy, including teaching youngsters at the now-closed Shuman Juvenile Detention Center how to tell their stories through words and music. Along the way, he ends up homeless – but not hopeless.

With 1Hood Media’s help, he completes his first musical recording, “Reject,” that year, followed by a merchandising campaign for the project in 2019. Also in 2018, he helps compose the musical score for the City Theatre production of “Pipeline,” an award-winning play about educational injustice.

In 2020, at a protest event sparked by the death of George Floyd, Mr. Banks recites a poem he penned about racial injustice titled “Don’t Clip Our Tails.” The following year, a video based on the poem, and featuring Mr. Banks, airs on PublicSource, a local online news service. The video wins a Mid-Atlantic Emmy Award.

“I would say 1Hood is the reason I’m able to do a lot of the cool things I’ve done,” says Mr. Banks, who became the organization’s lead teaching artist in 2020. “They’ve put me in positions where I was able to engage my art in a way I wouldn’t have thought possible by myself. 1Hood

helped me get my foot in the door for activism. I always wanted to be an activist, but I didn't know how to go about it.”

1Hood Media, an increasingly influential community-based institution in Pittsburgh, situates itself at the juncture of arts and activism – building out the emerging collaboration of the two that's sometimes called “artivism.” Since its establishment in 2010, 1Hood Media has helped Mr. Banks and other young artists use their creativity and passion as a vehicle to promote social justice, public education and human liberation.

1Hood Media began as a media-education offshoot of 1Hood, an artists collective founded in 2006 that blended hip-hop culture and social activism. Eventually 1Hood Media absorbed and expanded the original organization and its mission.

“We were the younger activists and were sort of the hip-hop generation,” recalls 1Hood Media's co-founder and CEO, hip-hop artist Jasiri X. “It's not that we had a negative view of the Urban League and NAACP. They were just part of a different generation. Our initial vision was, how can we do activism in an authentic way while doing the arts?”

Like many socially conscious artistic initiatives of the 20th and 21st centuries, 1Hood Media's broader mission isn't new. It's a continuation of a Black American tradition of using the arts to foster Black empowerment, from Harlem Renaissance writers such as Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes to blues musicians who used their melodies to tell the stories of the “Invisible Ones” and “Strange Fruit.” 1Hood serves the present age by providing a contemporary training ground, platform and microphone for the voices and lived experiences of urban youth and young adults.

That mission has been buoyed by 1Hood Media's designation as one of 16 Pittsburgh's Cultural Treasures, which came with a \$250,000 grant from The Heinz Endowments and the Ford Foundation – and the opportunity to fuel the flight of the Artivist Academy, which 1Hood Media officially added in 2018.

“That dual acknowledgment is so important not only for 1Hood, but for any artist and activist working in that realm, at the intersection of arts and activism,” says Celeste Smith, co-founder and board chair of 1Hood. “Social justice is important to everyone, and it takes money to make that happen. The monetary support through this designation sends a signal that the work is important. Activists and artists have homes and families and responsibilities. They want to do the work of social justice but also be able to survive.”

Mr. Banks is among the first fruits of the Artivist Academy, testament to 1Hood Media's conviction that any activism intended to promote social progress must be intentionally intergenerational. The organization has contributed to the development and success of numerous artists, from Mr. Banks to musical artist Brittney Chantele to hip-hop performer and songwriter Jordan Montgomery.

Mr. Montgomery was a rising junior at Pittsburgh's High School for the Creative and Performing Arts in the summer of 2011 when he became one of the first artists to attend 1Hood's media

academy, which is currently led by Mr. Banks. Mr. Montgomery's academic focus in school was literary arts, and the instruction at the academy "was a perfect marriage" of his passions for writing and social justice, he says.

"It's very cool to see how it has grown in those many years since then," says Mr. Montgomery, who later served as a teaching artist at the academy. "A lot of my first big performing opportunities were through 1Hood. It helped me gain skills as a performer as well as my overall artistry."

Now, at 27, Mr. Montgomery is paying it forward. His Driving While Black Records label promotes not just his music, but the creativity of four budding artists on his roster – all of whom participated in 1Hood programming at some point.

1Hood Media "encouraged me to tell my own stories," Mr. Montgomery says. "I use music as my creative outlet to express how I feel. For a lot of people, including myself, 1Hood was the first step into their careers as artists and exposing them to a lot of opportunities, and building that community of like-minded individuals."

Mr. Banks says 1Hood Media has influenced him and fellow artists to appreciate the arts ecosystem and has reinforced his commitment to helping others get opportunities to grow and shape their artist-activist vocations.

"As an artist myself, 1Hood has had such a huge impact on my career," he says. "And now that I'm in a position to make that same impact on the careers of others, that's what I want to do, I want to make sure artists have the resources to liberate themselves through their art. And liberate their communities through their art, because you can't have one without the other."

While many observe the cultural impact 1Hood Media has had on Pittsburgh and beyond, Ms. Smith says it's still unfolding. The collaboration, relationship-cultivating and trust-building that the organization has prioritized over the years bode well for its future, she says.

"We have built a foundation on honesty and trust. We're very transparent with what we do, how we do what we do, and why we do what we do," says Ms. Smith, who is the wife of Jasiri X. "1Hood belongs to the community – the work we do is for the community. We have a long and consistent track record of being there when people need us in significant ways. We have shown people that you can be who you are and support yourself and be successful without compromising. We won't apply for funding that won't let us remain authentic. Our values guide us, not the grant application."

Social justice is long-term work that is chronically underfunded, Ms. Smith says. Being "nimble" and "responsive" is important as 1Hood Media moves forward and leans more into areas like voter education, child well-being, politics and media, she adds.

"How do we as a community of Black journalists, observers and constituents tell our own story accurately and consistently? Black people have always moved and navigated through the arts,"

she notes. “We’re going to keep doing what we’re doing, we’re going to amplify what we’re doing, and everybody will benefit.”

Given 1Hood Media’s position and direction, its programmatic emphasis will expand to address new social and cultural developments, possibly adding a residency program, Jasiri X says.

“I always kind of look at it as, what else can we do?” he says. “How can we improve the collective lives of Black Pittsburgh? We find ourselves, now that violence is going up, using art and culture as a way to get into that space, as well. How many times has art changed the landscape in terms of how people see things differently? Cultural change always precedes political change. Our goal is to reform things to build liberated communities.”

LaMont Jones Jr. is a writer living in Northern Virginia. Twitter: @DrLaMontJones