

"Hip-Hop" Performer Gets Hook from High School

BY JEN GODDU

Cleetus Friedman was performing his "hip-hop theatre" piece *Cracker* at Lake Forest High School on April 16 when he was given the hook. He had used his 45 minute allotment for scenes from the show and Q&A with the students without incident in one assembly, but during the second performance he was interrupted by two faculty members who told him the show must stop.

Jay Hoffmann, assistant principal at the school, said some students had complained to organizers about the language, racial and sexual themes, so the performance was halted. "We realize Cleetus Friedman is playing a part and it was theatre but it was inappropriate for our Dimensions program," he said.

Friedman was performing an abridged version of his show (which he performs with DJ Savage on the turntables) as part of the school's annual Dimensions program that aims to expose students to careers and the arts. Friedman was one of 106 presenters over two days. He was invited to perform and discuss a career in the performing arts.

Stacy Vermynen, a school parent and chair of the search committee for Dimensions, said a faculty member had heard or read about *Cracker* and suggested she look into it as a way to expose the students to hip-hop. She had communicated with Friedman for a few months via e-mail prior to his presentation but no one saw his show in advance.

Friedman cut some of the profanity and a few of the more challenging characters but he had left his piece "WITE Radio" as is. That segment features a white radio disc jockey hosting a program featuring "all songs nigger." He lists off a series of rap and hip-hop song titles pronouncing the word "nigga" as "nigger." Even when a black listener calls to clarify the issue, spelling the word out "N-I-G-G-A," the disc jockey just doesn't get it. Friedman says, "The whole point is that there is no difference. It is the same word."

Friedman did notice some students leaving the auditorium during the piece but he kept going. "I didn't think twice about it," he said. He ended the segment and went off-stage to change for his next scene. When he went to go back on-stage two adults intervened, telling him he must stop his show.

"It caused a huge controversy with the word nigger," Friedman said. "The students heard that word and kind of freaked out."

Friedman went back on-stage and announced, "The show's just been cancelled because people were offended," and opened the floor up for discussion. "I'm not a racist and I'm certainly not here to offend anybody," Friedman said.

While describing himself as upset and overwhelmed by what happened, Friedman did concede that "in a sense this is the best thing that could have happened because it started a huge discussion."

The school agrees. "It was a little tense when it was going on, we had a lot of upset kids and adults, but good came out of it eventually," Hoffmann said.

"We made lemonade out of lemons," adds Vermylen. "I think in the end [the students] really learned something from it and that's always good." Dimensions organizers also learned that they need to better understand the nature of what is to be presented in the future, she said.

One complaint Friedman did have was with school officials returning the mailing list he had passed around with some of its pages ripped out. He was told the faculty thought he was soliciting members for a Cracker club of white supremacists. "I'm Jewish," Friedman said. "How many Jewish people are heading up white supremacist groups?"

Hoffmann said that while there was one person who did have that misconception, the school's reason for taking out the names of Lake Forest students was that "they signed it as they went in and before they knew what they were involved with."

The school fielded a number of calls about the program that day and the next. One was from a person affiliated with the NAACP, but Hoffman said they called just to get the facts and it was not an official visit.