

Students document black radio's impact

WDAS the place for news, tunes

IT STARTED OUT as a simple project, a classroom assignment on a subject of their choice.

Before the kids from Masterman had finished, their little 10-minute documentary on the civil-rights activism of WDAS-AM, a local radio station, had earned them acclaim in local,

state and national competitions.



ELMER SMITH

Even more, by the time they blew the dust off the grainy black-and-white pictures of radio personalities in their skinny-legged suits and bouffant hairdos, and replayed some of that history, they learned some things about this city's history that aren't always taught in classes or covered in textbooks.

Sophomores Samuel Kopansky, 16, Catherine Breiner and Laura Garcia, both 15, teamed up to work on an assignment for National History Day, a requirement for 10th-graders at Masterman.

Their African-American history teacher, Amy Cohen, entered their documentary, "WDAS: Broadcasting a Frequency of Change" in a local competition. They won first place.

That win sent them to Millersville University, where 6,000 student documentaries, exhibits and papers vied for a chance to compete nationally. They won first place in the state group-documentary category.

They made it into the national competition at the University of Maryland two weeks ago. Since then, they have been honored with resolutions from Mayor Nutter and the state Legislature.

All of this about a radio station that none of them listened to. "We figured this station must have been mostly about Jimi Hendrix or Michael Jackson," Kopansky said.

"But when we went home and researched we found that it was really into the community, especially during the civil-rights movement."

What they learned and ended up teaching the judges and other participants in the competition was that black radio was, and to a lesser extent still is, the place where the black community could get its daily bulletins.

It has never been enough to just spin records or host talk shows. The obligatory 30-second public-service announcements that mainstream stations parcel out to meet FCC requirements could never meet the needs of an underserved community.

The students' short documentary was distilled from hours of copious research. They pored through the Blockson Collection at Temple University, Temple's urban archives and the files of the Free Library of Philadelphia.

"We had to produce an annotated bibliography and a process paper to show what we did," Kopansky said.

"I think what surprised me most was that it was Bob Klein, an average white man, who changed the format from what it was to something more interesting to the African-American community.



Courtesy of Bob Klein Archives

WDAS had a significant part in the civil-rights movement. From left to right, DJ Georgie Woods, the Rev. Ralph Abernathy, reporter Ed Bradley, Martin Luther King Jr., Bob Klein and Cecil B. Moore.

"They were in the community. In its prime, in the '50s and '60s, it was instrumental in the civil-rights movement. They did voter registration.

"It played music, too. A lot of black musicians that didn't get played got played on WDAS."

The late Ed Bradley, of CBS fame, got his start in broadcasting at WDAS, starting as a gofer for the late and legendary Georgie Woods and other DJs. The late Art Peters worked at WDAS before graduating from law school and becoming a featured columnist at the *Inquirer*.

"I think just the magnitude of what they were doing surprised me," Breiner said. "It was just a little station.

"It was unique. It was very personalized and focused on the community. You can't do that today with big corporate stations. Maybe college stations can."

Clear Channel, the current owner of WDAS, might argue that point. And small stations like WURD are still in the business of grass-roots community service.

But the days when jocks like Woods and the late Jocko Henderson routinely left the studio and went out to lead marches or campaigns may never return.

"We should still be in a struggle to get our airwaves back to what they were," said Wynne Alexander, who maintains the WDASHistory.org Web site.

"Times have changed, but whether it's voting rights or public safety, we still need the checks and balances to make government more responsive." ★

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