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Wheels of steel in need of DJs

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Memo to the mayor: All over Charlotte this summer, groups of African American teens are coming together in oversized white T-shirts over rap music and spinning turntables. And taxpayers are footing the bill.

Thanks to a \$6,500 grant from the N.C. Arts Council, Mecklenburg County Park and Recreation is putting on "With These Hands Mix" DJ training camps free for local youths ages 13 to 17.

It's part of an effort to reach teens who might not normally participate in county-run programming, said Terri Stowers, a facility manager who is in charge of the DJ camps.

"We're really trying hard to come up with ideas that they're interested in -- something other than basketball," she said.

Tuition is \$110 for the two-week sessions, but nobody has had to pay yet because the grant is not even half-used, Stowers said. Local recreation centers are having to go door-to-door to fill up the 14 slots per site.

But the camps haven't had trouble attracting pedigreed local talent like instructor Donald Parker, 41, a Morehouse College grad who goes by DJ S.L.I.C.E. Parker said he is learning firsthand how hard it is to attract urban youth to structured activities. He went from 14 students Monday to four Wednesday at the Phillip O. Berry Recreation Center; students got frustrated very easily by having to use a textbook and learn the fundamentals of spinning tracks.

"Most of them thought that on Day One they would be able to do scratching," Parker said, referring to the distinctive sound that comes from moving a record back and forth on a turntable. "There's a lot more that goes into it. ... It's not as easy as it looks on TV."

It was a different scene at the West Charlotte Recreational Center, another location holding a DJ camp during this cycle. There, in an aging yellow cinderblock room normally used for senior nutritional seminars, Tracy Stateman ("Cat-X"), 41, drilled his students Thursday on the anatomy of the \$569 Battlepak turntable system, provided to the camps by Sam Ash Music.

"You don't just want to know how to play the turntable, you want to know where everything is," he instructed Jaimar Brown, 15, of Charlotte. "Pick your needles up!" he added as Jaimar came dangerously close to damaging a record.

The grant that allows students to attend for free helps a lot, Stateman said.

"It's a good incentive. ... We're looking at a hard, low-income area here," he said. "It's a whole positive outlook -- getting the kids off the street where they could be doing something else."

Stateman said that of his nine students, perhaps four are seriously interested in being a DJ. After only three days, however, 14-year-old Nkosi Wallace caught on. Doo-ragged heads bobbed up and down across the room as Nkosi took his turn at spinning tracks.

Nkosi has his eye on a bigger prize at the front of the stage, though; he wants to be like his idol, Notorious B.I.G.

"I've always been about music and rap," he said. "If I don't get that, I can fall back on this."

Want to Know More?

Two more sessions of the "With These Hands Mix" academy are scheduled to be offered this summer, July 23-Aug. 3 and Aug. 6-17. Space is available at a number of recreation centers across Mecklenburg for teens 13-17. For more information, including exact locations and scholarship applications, contact Terri Stowers at 704-336-3699 or visit www.parkandrec.com.