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Trouser wars

Ministry promotes positive behavior by black youths

By James Dowd

Contact

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When talking to teens, as he's doing more often these days, Roland Robinson shoots straight from the hip: Pull your pants up.

The self-described visionary's message is plain but provocative, and the 35-year-old is on a mission to save society from itself -- one pair of sagging pants at a time.

Robinson recently launched pullyourpantssubmission.com, a ministry aimed at teens that promotes self-respect and self-control. The site targets young black men whose trousers dip well below the waistline, which he said distinguishes them as losers and diminishes their communities.

"It's not just about pulling your pants up, it's about pulling your state of mind up," Robinson said. "These boys who go around with their pants hanging down, walking like gorillas, what does that say? 'Disrespect' and 'I don't care' is what it says."

Robinson wants to change that. So far his self-funded ministry has been fairly simple, consisting of the Web site, bookmarks and occasional forays to parks and teen hangouts where he offers his message to anyone willing to listen.

But in the last couple of weeks, he's met with a number of local civic and religious leaders, asking for their support. He hopes to establish a series of summer programs for urban youth, featuring inspirational speakers and activities that promote positive behavior.

On Tuesday, Robinson spoke at a community action meeting at the Martin Luther King Jr. Educational Center on South Lauderdale and the response was overwhelmingly positive.

"He's earnest and passionate in thinking of ways to deal with problems that speak to youth directly at their level," said Frederica Jones, IP Village coordinator for the RISE Foundation. "It may seem like another world, another language, but for us to say we don't understand is not a sufficient response. Roland seems able and willing to connect with these young people in a way that might actually make a difference."

In addition to the online community, Robinson markets his message through music. A self-produced "Pull Your Pants Up" CD contains a dozen gospel hip-hop songs that encourage kids to follow a holy path.

"There are so many wannabe rappers and wannabe thugs, trying to act like these people they see in videos with the gold teeth and all their bling," Robinson said. "My idea is to take this music that's got a negative attitude and turn it around. Put a positive spin on rap and reach these kids in a way they'll accept."

The concept gets high marks from Rev. Kenneth Whalum Jr., a member of the Memphis school board and pastor of The New Olivet Baptist Church.

"It reflects poorly on black culture, but it's true that so many of our young men are walking around with their pants sagging and people just stick their heads in the sand and pretend like it's not a problem," Whalum said. "Well it is a problem and we need to address it. Instead of thinking of hip-hop music as the enemy, we need to co-opt it and give young people positive messages."

Robinson hopes others come to the same conclusion. He also hopes that by the time his 1-year-old son is a teenager, saggy, baggy breeches won't be a problem.



Jim Weber/The Commercial Appeal

Fed up with what he considers negative rap and the culture that surrounds it, Roland Robinson is preaching a message he calls "Pull Your Pants Up."

"It's never too late to save a child, we just have to be committed to doing it," Robinson said. "Memphis can be an agent for a positive change if we get to these kids, one at a time, and get them to pull their pants up."

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More info

To find out more about Roland Robinson's ministry, visit pullyourpantsupmission.com.

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