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Exploring hip-hop abroad

By Jerry Large

Seattle Times staff columnist

Aisha Fukushima has a purpose that fits her.

She graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Whitman College yesterday, but today she's not worried about competing for a job in a fractured economy.

Fukushima is about to launch herself on a new journey of discovery in which she will travel the world for a year exploring hip-hop culture, looking at what's common across borders, what songs say about social conditions in particular places, how rap is used to protest or educate.

Her interest is not in the booty shaking and bling of commercial rap. She believes the best hip-hop explores issues, stimulates conversation and opens a window to the lives of the young people who create it.

The Watson Foundation agrees, and awarded her proposal one of its 40 fellowships, which will provide \$28,000 to support her year abroad. The fellowships, created in 1961, honor IBM founder Thomas Watson.

"When I applied for the Watson, I knew this was the right next step for me," she told me last week.

Appreciation of the power of the arts to foster communication and an openness to other cultures grew from her roots.

As a young woman, her mother, who is African American, learned Chinese and went backpacking across Asia, where she met her future husband in Japan.

Fukushima spent her early years shuttling between Seattle and Yokohama, Japan.

Her parents were booking agents, so she got to see life backstage. They separated when she was 7 and she settled in Bellevue with her mother, who started a housecleaning business to support herself and her daughter.

Fukushima said her mother worked long hours and suggested that her daughter get involved in after-school activities. One of the programs included singing, and Fukushima was hooked. She's been singing and acting ever since, and still likes to fill her time with activities.

At Whitman she's been in student government, started a hip-hop band, the Raptivists (rap activists), worked on environmental projects, designed a program to introduce low-income children to college, and more. "I do tend to keep busy," she said. "It's important to give back to your community, to engage and learn along the way."

And she's always seen the arts as more than entertainment.

When she was in high school, at the International School in Bellevue, some of the things students would say suggested to her a need for expanded cultural awareness.

"A lot of times I get the question, 'What are you?'" she said. Or someone would say, "You're not black enough to wear that," or "You're not Japanese enough to be eating that."

She created a project called "Turn off the Stereotypes," in which she got artists from a variety of backgrounds to lead workshops. Students and parents sang or acted, and at the end of each session there was a discussion of racial or cultural issues that allowed an exploration of the stereotypes we hold.

Even in college, Fukushima, said, sometimes people see only part of her. "Someone last week said, this is such a diverse party, we even have a black person. I looked around ... oh, me."

The idea for her world project began forming last year, which she spent studying in France.

She listened to rap lyrics with messages about social inequality and thought about how the specific issues differed from place to place, but young people around the world had embraced hip-hop as a way to speak out.

In France, the lives of immigrants generated raps. She collaborated on a song, half French and half English, and "I got my first taste of international hip-hop dialogue."

She'll do more collaborating and even put together an album, but the main thing will be to listen and gain insight into the lives of people elsewhere.

Ahead of her, she says, is more education, then some kind of participation in the political realm, maybe internationally. "I don't know where I'd fit in, but this year will help me understand myself better so that I can make an informed decision."

I look forward to seeing what grows from her passions.

Jerry Large's column appears Monday and Thursday. Reach him at 206-464-3346 or jlarge@seattletimes.com.