

# Making a Difference

NYC PT teams with hip-hop artist to help change kids' health

By Rob Senior

**TWENTY YEARS IN A PROFESSION—ANY PROFESSION—WILL GIVE** a person a fairly clear indication of how they want to spend the remainder of their careers. Working the past two decades in the New York City public school system had shown Maura Casey, PT, that the health of our nation's children was headed in the wrong direction.

But instead of just talking about the problem, Casey chose a most unconventional means of addressing the issue. She collaborated with hip-hop legend Grandmaster Melle Mel to release *The Portal in the Park*, the first in a new series of empowerment books for children. The book comes with a bonus audio CD in which Melle Mel raps the narration.

"The book can help children at very young ages and their parents learn how to stay healthy and control their emotions," said Casey. "The book includes rap songs to keep them interested, to help them have fun and to remember what they are learning. It's amazing how much they are affected by what they hear and remember at a young age."

## Background

Casey had the idea for some time to work on a combination children's book/CD, but it wasn't until a chance meeting on a train that she came into contact with Melle Mel.

"I happened to be talking to a friend of his who thought he might be interested," she recalled, "and the rest is history."

Melle Mel, whose real name is Melvin Glover, got his start as the lead rapper of Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, who earlier this year became the first-ever rap group inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame. Throughout his musical career, Melle Mel touched on topics of social awareness, such as drug policies and their effects on the black community. Now 46, Melle Mel still works out daily and has ambitions of embarking upon a career in professional wrestling.

"He's known as the rapper who cares about helping children stay away from drugs and stay healthy through exercise," said Casey. "Most hip-hop lyrics these days are sending negative messages to our kids; Melle is a proponent of exercise and healthy living."

So when Casey approached him, Melle Mel was impressed with the book's idea and ideals and agreed to help revamp the songs on the accompanying album. "He was eager to read the book on disc to the children," added Casey, "and to lead them in our new DVD of exercise and dance."

## Casey's Experience

It's not hard for Casey to imagine the potential this series has for reaching kids—she just looks in front of her every day.

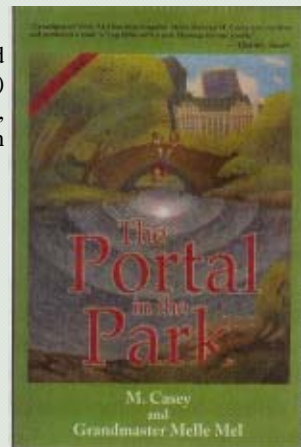
"This year, I'm working with a 13-year-old boy who weighs 350 pounds," she said. "I saw him when he was in first grade and he weighed 150 pounds. It's sad, and it's preventable."

The duo is promoting the book to the Boards of Education of at least three states, and recently spoke at The Family Academy in Manhattan about using music to promote their positive message. In addition, a Quality of Life concert is taking place at Central Park this summer and has invited Melle Mel to perform one of the seven inspirational songs from the book. The concert will be used as a fundraiser to bring awareness to global warming and offer aid to victims of disasters like Hurricane Katrina.

Casey encourages a holistic approach to education. As the idea of a physical therapist reaching out to a Grammy award-winning hip-hop artist to reach children suggests, she's not afraid of trying unconventional methods to accomplish just about anything.

"We must raise flagging spirits by using both sides of the brain [to encourage learning through both music and reading]," she said.

According to Casey, kids diagnosed with attention deficit disorder (ADD) will especially benefit from the series, as the approach will keep them on their toes. "The new concept of the



COURTESY MAURA CASEY

screenplay book captivates kids, keeping them focused and interested in reading. Learning should be fun."

### The Biorhythm Academy

"The Biorhythm Academy" is the name given to the fictional school in *The Portal in the Park*, and Casey revealed it will also be the name of the second book in the series. Casey hopes some day to see her fictional school become a reality. She explained, "The Biorhythm Academy is an empowerment school with progressive ergonomics using dynamic seating to integrate music, movement and academics."

Biorhythms are composed of three main cycles:

- Intelligence/academic quotient (IQ)
- Emotional/spiritual quotient (EQ)
- Physical quotient (PQ)

"Equal focus should be placed on emotional/spiritual, physical fitness and academic/intelligence where learning is holistic and uses both sides of the brain," said Casey.

Schools today, especially in urban areas, provide academic backgrounds but have almost completely eliminated physical education, and provide next to nothing in the way of guidance and emotional support, according to Casey. This produces children with sagging spirits, low self-esteem and distorted views of their "place" in society.

On the physical end, much has been made of the obesity epidemic, but severe eating disorders have also become commonplace. The result? Record depression and dropout rates in kids as they reach high school.

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"It needs to stop," said Casey. "Our education system in this country needs reconstructive surgery."

So how can these biorhythmic programs be implemented? "One class every semester should deal with a child's emotional growth," said Casey. "Even looking at some of our Nobel Prize winners—many of them had serious emotional issues. We're treating the symptom, not the problem."

While they are spoken of and dealt with much differently, Casey feels that physical and emotional pain are very similar in that they make it difficult to focus on anything else—including education. "You couldn't go into a burn unit and teach a child math," she reasoned. "They'd be too distracted by the pain. In my opinion, emotional pain produces the same result."

So what will the book do to change this? And why should people whose kids aren't in urban public schools care?

"Because other children will end up angry, resentful and filled with low self-esteem—and those are the people your children will be sharing society with as adults," said Casey. "Everyone should be interested in creating an equally wonderful experience for every child in our public schools." ■



**MAURA CASEY, PT, AT A PROMOTION FOR HER BOOK *THE PORTAL IN THE PARK*, WHICH SUPPORTS HEALTHY LIFESTYLES FOR KIDS.**

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