

FAMU Alumnus Takes Vision to TV in 'Harlem Heights'

Contributed by Kikora Mason -- Black College wire
Friday, 29 May 2009

Creator of BET show says "I am quite grateful for FAMU"

Black reality television shows: Their purpose is to entertain audiences.

From flamboyant homosexuals to loud, belligerent drunkards, this seemed to be the only depiction of young, black Americans on TV shows—until Randolph Sturup came along with his new BET show "Harlem Heights." The Florida A&M University School of Business & Industry graduate is trying to change the representation of black young adults on TV with his creation.

The new series, which launched March 2, explores the lives of eight unique recent college graduates trying to make a name for themselves in one of New York's most historic neighborhood, Harlem.

Sturup had humble beginnings as an SBI student and felt he obtained a great foundation for success in SBI.

"I really admired Dr. Mobley [former dean of SBI] and her professional development curriculum," Sturup said.

When Sturup wasn't in the classroom preparing himself to be successful in corporate America, he emerged and educated himself in as much literature about the media industry as possible—he always knew he wanted a career in the demanding industry.

Upon graduation, Sturup moved to the media capital of the world, New York City, equipped with knowledge of business and accounting, ready to tackle the city head on.

In 2006, with the help of his sister, Sturup tapped into his entrepreneurial genius and created his own multi-media production company, Minna Mae Productions. The name was inspired by his West Indian family heritage.

"Harlem Heights" is one of the first productions of Minna Mae and Sturup served as co-creator and executive producer for the show.

"I really felt the need to show positive, young African-Americans on TV, especially in their mid-twenties," Sturup said.

"Harlem's just the pulse of black culture—the cast shows America the definition of the new Harlem Renaissance. Why not [host the show] in the world's most famous neighborhood?" he added.

All of the cast members -- Brooke, Ashlei, Bridget, Christian, Pierre, Landon, Briana, and Jason -- are upwardly mobile individuals striving for greatness in their personal and professional lives.

From a designer to an aspiring lawyer to community leader, they're just a great group of friends motivated to make a difference in the community, Sturup says.

"The show reflects a perception of African-Americans that people rarely see on TV," said Jasmine Leslie, 18, a freshman-engineering student from Chicago. "As students, we all watch the show thinking their lifestyle is the life we want for ourselves. BET tends to air shows that resemble coon and sambo caricatures. There are few shows that represent the affluent side of African-Americans."

But a reality series would not be complete without some drama—a typical love triangle created between Ashlei, Christian, and Brooke.

Sturup said there were no scripts involved and all of the disagreements and confrontations were real.

"I think it's a groundbreaking show," said colleague, Mike Muse. "It's refreshing to look at African-Americans going against the grain of how we're normally perceived."

Even though the young CEO always knew he wanted to do his own productions, Minna Mae was no overnight success for Sturup.

It took three years of development and previous experience in the industry to make his dream a reality.

Sturru's tenure in the media and entertainment business began as he worked in the worldwide accounting division for HBO.

In 2007, he was a diversity fellowship recipient for the National Association of Television Program Executives, along with Muse.

"He's a very talented guy with great vision," Muse said. "He executes his vision which gives him a lot of respect in the media industry. A lot of people want to work with him."

Sturru has worked as a business manager/senior production accountant for MTV and VH-1.

During this time, he worked on projects such as "Laguna Beach" and "Room Raiders." He has also served as the manager of production and development for the Nick, Jr. and Noggin Series: "Dora the Explorer," "Go Diego, Go!," "The Wonder Pets," and "The Upside Down Show."

With Minna Mae, Sturru has a few television, film, and theater projects currently underway.

He also serves as the lead consultant/project manager for Delfeayo Marsalis' animation project, "Jazmine and the Blue Notes."

"I am quite grateful for FAMU," Sturru said. "The school was extremely instrumental in my career. I never gave up on my dream—there were times I felt it wouldn't happen, but I never gave up."

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Kikora Mason writes for The Famuan, The Florida A&M University student newspaper, which originally published this article.