

Remarks for Ambassador Lukens
Inauguration of the Hip Hop Akademy
Leopold Sedar Senghor Cultural Center, Pikine
January 20, 2012

(As prepared)

Naanga def!

I must say this is an honor, and a lot of fun, to be the first official visitor to West Africa's first and only Hip Hop Akademy. There is no more important subject, I am sure that you would agree, than improving the future of young people. With several years of experience, you at AfriCultUrban have the expertise to establish and grow this new Hip Hop Akademy for education, performing arts management training, and research and documentation of urban culture in West Africa.

The U.S. Embassy, through its Public Affairs Section, was one of the first and largest partners with you because we see enormous potential for job creation and artistic expression among Senegalese youth through music. It is a cliché to say that youth are the future of Senegal but of course it is true, and initiatives like this are inspiring. In fact, I am sure that my teenage daughter would love to be here with me today if she didn't have school.

The Hip Hop Akademy project is unique – and that is why I am here with you today, even though I just returned from an international trip last night. Hip-hop artists in Senegal have lyrics that feature positive messages calling for peace, political and social justice, and healthy lifestyles: crucial themes that we at the Embassy support as well. While I as the U.S. Ambassador can give a speech on fighting corruption or exercising the right to vote, music like hip-hop can be a much more effective tool to reach youth. It can even be transformative, altering one's life. Moreover, as Americans, we feel a certain affiliation with hip-hop as it is a music style -- perhaps like jazz or gospel -- that was developed in the United States but that holds solid African influences. I have heard that while *mbalax* is still considered the national music of Senegal, when it comes to young Senegalese, hip hop reigns.

So, in conclusion, thank you for having me here today, congratulations on AfriCultUrban's 6th anniversary, and I wish you all every success with the Hip Hop Akademy and your future endeavors.