



Young Downtown entrepreneurs use positive image to launch clothing line

By Sarah McKenzie

The name of their new business is Blame it on Hip Hop, but the entrepreneurs credit the art form with bringing them together.

Five 20- and/or 30-something business professionals are working on the new clothing line, trademarked Blame It on Hip Hop, also known as "BIOHH" (pronounced Bee-Oh). They meet weekly in a posh Warehouse District loft owned by the group's founder, Marcus Manning, a 32-year-old mortgage counselor.

Blue, white and black shirts, featuring the graffiti-style BIOHH logo with a microphone for the "I" and a record for the "O," line a closet in Manning's River Walk loft, 401 N. 1st St.

The men have aspirations to quit their day jobs and make the business a full-time gig. For now, they sell the clothing via a Web site (www.blameitonhiphop.com). They also sell the shirts at concerts and push hip-hop artists to wear the shirts. So far, they've got the Pharaohs and Brooklyn hip-hopper Ray "the Crippler" to don their styles.

The men behind BIOHH are passionate

about hip-hop. They spoke at length about their new venture during a recent interview at Manning's North Loop home. To date, the men have collectively invested more than \$10,000 of their own cash and have plans to pitch their business plan to other financiers soon, Manning said.

Manning said the group has recently closed deals to sell BIOHH in stores in Florida, California and New York.

The men work in a variety of fields — design, information technology and business. Besides Manning, the group includes M.C. Livingstone, chief executive officer; Richard "DJ Spank" Strong, a marketing and information technology guru; James Cheatham, marketing manager; and Johari Moten, director of creative services and marketing.

The partners have a playful chemistry; they often finish one another's sentences and act like group of boisterous brothers. They've been friends for years, frequented clubs together and, for some, collaborated on music projects as deejays.

So what's with the name, then? And why are they so proud to be linked with a refer-

ence to body odor (since their name is pronounced Bee-Oh)?

Well, hip-hop is "funky," they joked.

More seriously, they said it's often misunderstood.

The men described hip-hop as an art form that encompasses rap, graffiti art and sense of a style in clothing, speech and mannerisms.

When Manning describes hip-hop music to his grandmother, he puts it in simple terms: you start with a poem, then add a little foot tapping or hit your hand on the desk for a beat.

In essence, he said, hip-hop is a storytelling medium. "It's words strategically placed and synchronized over a dope beat," he said.

Livingstone, 30, said hip-hop often gets linked with violence and sexual exploitation — something he considers antithetical to its purpose.

"Hip-hop is a culture," he said. "It's where we found a place to express ourselves. ... It's all about love and unity."

Manning quickly chimed in. "It's pure — straight from the heart. It's an expression —