How This Famous Rapper-Entrepreneur Is Transforming The Bronx

Legendary rapper Styles P grew up without access to healthy food options. And frankly, he had no interest.

Life on the road – where he toured the world with Sean "P. Diddy" Combs and DMX – didn't help.

"As a hip-hop artist in the 90s, my diet was horrible," said Styles P. "All fast food. Pizza, fried chicken, snack cakes, things with high-fructose corn syrup."

Now Styles P, born David Styles, has done an about-face and cofounded a chain of juice bars that's transforming urban food deserts. In these disadvantaged communities, much-needed staples aren't often available at affordable prices.

The Bronx location of Juices for Life in Castle Hill, two blocks from where Jennifer Lopez was raised, is across the street from the graffiti-ridden exterior of a deli. Inside are posters on the health benefits of wheatgrass, a U.S. Army recruitment brochure, a copy of *The Legal Advocate* and cards promoting local barber and real-estate businesses. The industrial, almost rustic space has a no-frills attitude – high ceilings, large windows, a giant cayenne-pepper shaker, a drum from Uganda and a large deli-counter with colorful fruits and vegetables. The shop is fast becoming a community stalwart.

"Sometimes you buy a juice and it says 20 percent juice. … Well, what's the rest?" Styles P asked emphatically. He hasn't left the rap game behind entirely: He wears a gold Juices for Life necklace. "We are creating a market for health."

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Juices for Life boasts more interesting flavor combinations than the average juice bar. Customers can find spinach, pear, pineapple, papaya, strawberry and beet – plus custom options. An employee with the nickname “Kale” served a bold, off-the-menu blend that contained ginseng and bark.

“It’s not just a store, it’s a culture,” said a customer who was enjoying a flavorful smoothie. In fact, culture and mindset, along with access and education, can be a barrier in neighborhoods like Castle Hill.

“So many poor communities have a lack of choices and don’t have awareness,” Styles P said. “I thought ‘organics’ was a foreign word.”

Approximately 23.5 million people live in food deserts. And nearly half of those areas also are low-income.

“This is ridiculous that kids can walk 10, 20 blocks and not have healthy options,” said Styles P, who now preaches the benefits of plant-based nutrition. “You’re bound to catch a felony with nothing but fried chicken in your body.”

The fact that Styles P’s entrepreneurial venture is revitalizing communities – where liquor stores and fast food chains abound – is well-known in the area. “This basically changed the whole neighborhood,” said a customer who introduced himself as “the bodyguard” because he works in security and also as a gym teacher.

Juices for Life seems to have created a ripple effect. More local delis and neighborhood venues are beginning to offer salads and smoothies. Styles P takes pride in sparking some healthy competition in the area.

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Building community.

Beyond this, Juices for Life has become a place for building community in urban neighborhoods.

In less than a day at the Castle Hill shop, people from all walks of life interacted: a man passionate about raising awareness for autism, a train operator, an entrepreneur, a woman who collects data for the government, a student at Lehman College, a police officer and an HR professional. Customers were vegetarians and carnivores and came from all walks of life – a mix of suits and hoodies.

Styles P has cultivated a juice bar that attracts a true melting pot across race, gender, religion and class, bringing to life his "Love is Love" motto. Much of the rapper's inspiration comes from music, and he values the power of hip hop to bring people together.

"This is hip hop's first dope healthy brand," he said.

When he's not bridging the divide through health-driven endeavors, Styles P humbly reflects on his celebrity entrepreneur status. "I'm nowhere near where I want to be in life," he said, "but I'm grateful for what I've accomplished."

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