

# The Journey of Dr. E

"You can advance from whatever your situation is," says Dr. Elaine Richardson. "You can still be what you want to be. You can make something of your life." Growing up as an inner-city kid in Cleveland, Richardson learned early on about temptation, recovery and compassion. She earned the first of two degrees from Cleveland State University in 1991 while the school was still reeling from the Kevin Mackey scandal of the previous summer. Mackey, the basketball coach who brought CSU hoops into national prominence, was arrested as he staggered out of a downtown crack house. His once-promising career suddenly ceased to be. "Poor Mr. Mackey," Richardson says. "He was a great coach and he really cared about his student-athletes. He just got caught up. I can identify with that, because in my younger life I got caught up, too. It's easy to start, and hard to stop."

In her younger life, Richardson also wanted to be a professional singer. She got her first shot in the limelight at East Tech High School. "I sang in church before that," she says. "The girls in middle school, we were all in the choir together, and we said, 'Wow, we should try out for Miss Ross's talent show.' So we just started rehearsing and rehearsing, and that's how I got started."

Miss Ernestine Ross, a teacher at East Tech, was a legendary impresario who put on the best talent show in Cleveland. A demanding, exceptionally blunt perfectionist, Miss Ross had an ear for harmony, an eye for spectacle, and not much in the way of patience. "She was a drill sergeant, but she gave the inner-city kids something to look forward to,"

Richardson recalls. "Her show was every Thanksgiving, and people would start rehearsing as soon as school was out. But when you went

in front of her, everything had to be just right. She even made you time everything you did. She was like, 'I don't give a damn if you Michael Jackson. After 20 minutes I'm tired of yo' ass!'"

Richardson compares the East Tech Talent Shows to the musical

revues at Harlem's famous Apollo Theatre. "Nobody ever got booed because everybody was so damn good," Richardson says. "[Miss Ross] wouldn't let you be in the show if you weren't."

After graduating from East Tech in 1978, Richardson enrolled at Cleveland State but soon dropped out. "I was unfocused and then got in with the wrong crowd," she says. "Or maybe *I* was the wrong crowd. I'm not gonna blame it on anybody else. I got into drugs, prostitution...it's not a good life. After you get into it, it's a downhill stream." Aware that the crash-and-burn lifestyle would eventually kill her, Richardson rallied, recovered, and went back to Cleveland State, explaining that she "just got sick and tired of being sick and tired." She got her master's degree in 1993 and, three years later, earned a Ph.D. in English and applied linguistics from Michigan State. After a brief teaching stint at the University of Minnesota, Richardson joined the English department at Penn State in 1998. She also began work on her so-called "tenure book"—a revised version of her dissertation—which eventually morphed into an autobiography of sorts, a "modern day slave narrative," which will be published this summer.

"It's called *PHD to Ph.D.—Po' Ho' on Dope to Ph.D.: The Literacy Narrative of Dr. Elaine Richardson*," she says. "It's geared

toward people from the ghettos of Cleveland or Philly or Pittsburgh, people who are in environments where their identity is being

## COOL JOB FACTOR

**Name:** Dr. E (Elaine Richardson)

**Occupation:** Singer, songwriter, music publisher and independent record label owner

**1. The greatest part of my job is:** Writing songs, performing them in front of live audiences, connecting with people, sharing my life experiences, and feeling like I am making the world better through my work.

**2. My best day at work includes:** Connecting with people that have listened carefully to my music and hearing from them (about) how my music touched them.

**3. What most people wouldn't understand about my job is:** I have to do it! I was so focused on making tenure at my day job that for a few years, my live performances took a back seat. I realized that I was dying inside by not singing!

**4. If I weren't doing this for a living, I'd be:** I am trying to actually make music my living, so I am doing the other half of my passion—reading, writing and teaching about language, literacy and oral traditions and Black folk culture—keeping the voices of my people alive in new modes and contexts!