

# THE BOSTON PHOENIX

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■ **“Inner Bling”** When B.G. rapped about bling bling in the single of the same name back in 1999, he was talking about jewelry ( “ Man I got the price of a mansion 'round my neck and wrist ” ). The expression became so pervasive that it's entered the *Oxford English Dictionary* (shorter edition); it can refer to just about any ostentatious show of well-being. Now the phrase has taken another turn. Michelle Stewart, a 35-year-old woman from Watertown, aims to turn bling bling on its head with a Web site and T-shirt campaign extolling what she calls “ Inner Bling. ” The Web site, [www.InnerBling.com](http://www.InnerBling.com), defines Inner Bling as “ personal value that exists inside all people; wealth not derived from material possessions; the light of a person who is conscious of these things. ” Inner Bling promotes self over status, people and peace over possessions. Inner Bling offers an alternative to the message of materialism.

Materialism, says Stewart, “ is embedded in our culture. It's not just a hip-hop thing — it goes all the way down to keeping up with the Joneses, having a big house, an SUV. ” And she admits to getting caught up in this cultural current. “ For a while, I was trying to maintain a lifestyle, trying to gain more. ” But she realized that “ even though my salary was good, I was spending 40 hours a week doing something I didn't like. ” Stewart, who writes newsletters for a health-care insurer, talks of being unfulfilled and uninspired by her job. Instead of using the money she was earning to buy a car or more expensive clothes, she wanted “ to use the money to do something creative. So I put my

money into this. All of the campaign is funded with money I'm making at my job. I'm just throwing the idea out there and seeing what happens. ”

The Web site, which has been up since December, opens with a page of rap lyrics on the culture of excess and the alternative of looking inwards for fulfillment. ( “ It's not need; it's greed. A seed that leads to mindless/Acquisition of things, forgetting basic human love and/Kindness. A kind of blindness. You know greed can/Be at the root of violence... ” ) The audience is invited to submit its own versions of the rap on the “ Flow ” section of the site. The T-shirts (\$20), which feature variations on a swirling design with the Inner Bling logo, are screen-printed by Artists for Humanity, a Boston-based non-profit that gives inner-city teens apprenticeships in the arts. “ And if profits are part of Inner Bling's future, ” Stewart says, then she'll “ donate a percentage to peace and tolerance education in schools. ”

For the present, she adds, “ it's about the message and the T-shirts ” — but she's got plenty of ideas for Inner Bling in the incubator stage, including opening an inner-city yoga/mind-body center called Inner Bling aimed at pre-teens and teens. “ I like the idea of peace starting with the individual, and maybe planting this little idea of Inner Bling being the cool 'new' thing will somehow raise the collective consciousness. More peaceful individuals, more peace. ” ■

