Comedians Unite in Brooklyn to Help Young Superheroes

By ANDY BATTAGLIA

"This place is cool!" exclaimed 11-year-old Duncan MacLeod, as a flowing blue cape flapped above his outstretched arms on a recent afternoon. He was flying—or, technically, standing atop an industrial-strength "Cape Tester" at the Brooklyn Superhero Supply Co., with a large fan beneath his feet that made his new villain-vanquishing accessory billow.

Such flights of fancy are routine in the storefront guise of 826NYC, the nonprofit children's tutoring center in Park Slope that teaches kids and anyone else with an imagination to be silly and serious at once. On Wednesday, a cadre of comedians will gather in service of both for a benefit event at the Bell House in Gowanus, Brooklyn.

"If I was a kid, I couldn't think of anything more amazing than a place that pretended to supply superhero products and, when you open a [secret] door, you learn to write and do cool projects and work with people to make films," said Eugene Mirman, the Brooklyn-based stand-up comic who will host the benefit event alongside fellow comics Reggie Watts, Mike Birbiglia and Daniel Kitson, and author Sarah Vowell.

"A lot of people come and never know about the door," said 826NYC education associate Chris Roberti, pointing to an otherwise ordinary shelf in the superhero supply store that swings open to reveal a different kind of enterprise. While patrons ogle odd products for sale in the
Comedian Eugene Mirman sits in the store's tutoring center, which will be the beneficiary of a fundraiser on Wednesday.

Founded in 2004 as part of a project led by the writer Dave Eggers, 826NYC is one of eight such tutoring centers around the country, each with its own strange storefront to capture kids' attention (like the Pirate Supply Store in San Francisco, the Bigfoot Research Institute on Boston and the Time Travel Mart in Los Angeles). Since the beginning, the center in Park Slope has offered drop-in tutoring sessions for students ages 6 to 18 in need of help on their homework, as well as more structured classes and workshops for children who sign up or visit by way of field trips offered for free to public schools.

"With the superhero theme, the look of the place is whimsical and kid-friendly, but the ethos behind what we do is a rigorous and old-fashioned insistence on follow-through," said Ms. Vowell, who has served as president of the 826NYC board since its founding. A point of pride for her is an emphasis on collectivity and concretization that attends students' efforts. "We don't just foster student writing—we publish it," she said, alluding to bound volumes of group-written stories given to kids after classes and numerous anthologies assembled for sale. "We don't just run student filmmaking workshops every summer—we make sure those films are screened in a real movie theater at BAM."

Expenses for such activities are considerable, and as 826NYC approaches its 10th anniversary year, its creative ways of inspiring kids to be imaginative and resourceful face serious challenges.

"As a mostly volunteer operation, we run on generosity and enthusiasm," Ms. Vowell said. "Money-wise, there have been some grim, lean years for us. Honestly, our financial situation right now is worrisome, but I feel fortunate that money has always been our only problem."

Hence the benefit this week, one of many such 826NYC fundraising events that tap illustrious supporters and friends from different quirky corners of culture. One past benefit was a poker tournament emceed by "This American Life" radio host Ira Glass; others include the annual series "Scrabble for Cheaters," overseen by the likes of actor Peter Dinklage and humorist John Hodgman, for which players can pay extra to invent words and spy their opponents' holdings.

Benefits of the sort account for around 30% of 826NYC's annual budget, Ms. Vowell said, and their success is especially important as the center prepares to undergo a change in leadership. Later this month, departing executive director Scott Seeley will be replaced by Joshua Mandelbaum, most recently of the international-literature program Words Without Borders. Similarly, the founding director of education, Joan Kim, will be replaced by Mariama Lockington, from 826 National in San Francisco.

Less momentous, but likely more fun, the benefit on Wednesday will traffic in clever, crafty comedy for the sake of the kids at 826NYC. "It's nice to see a place where people can go whether they're interested in the idea of being a superhero or striking up great conversation around people who are really into what have you," said Reggie Watts, whose expansive brand of stand-up branches into beat-boxing, a capella compositions, music videos, and multimedia theater pieces. "It's healthy to support something that might be considered weird."
Mr. Mirman shared in the sentiment one afternoon this week as he made his way from the depths of the tutoring center, through the Superhero Supply Store storefront, and to the waiting world outside. Glancing at a product on display, he paused before the exit and reflected. "For $12 you can buy a force field," he said. "That seems fair."

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