

Anything Is Possible

826NYC's Brooklyn Superhero Supply Co.
Outfits the Writers of Tomorrow

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Matt comes in flustered and sweaty. He has run the five blocks from the subway through a sticky mid-September mist to make it on time for our Sunday meeting. He smiles, wipes the shaggy hair from his forehead, and removes the headphones from around his neck. His hands flop on the table as though in tagging it he has reached the finish line. I ask him what he's listening to and he names a band I've never heard of. "They're good," he says, "you'd like them." And then he hands me 15 new pages of his novel.

Matt is a tall, quiet 16-year-old who attends Bronx High School of Science and lives with his mother in the Brooklyn neighborhood of Bushwick. His commute to 826NYC, the free writing center in Park Slope where I work, is over an hour in each direction on the most unreliable trains in the city (the L to the G to the F) and requires a monkish patience with the MTA that is only found, I have noticed, in city kids. He hasn't missed a meeting since we started working together and his writing becomes clearer and more accomplished each week. He's not the sort of student who needs extra help with his work, he's the rarer kind—the type who shows you almost immediately, with his hair hiding his eyes, his frustration with the requirements of high school, and by his big, private smile, that he has learned to rely on writing.

Since we opened in the fall of 2004, 826NYC has already become a recognizable Brooklyn destination. While the backbone of our programming is one-on-one, drop-in tutoring after school and specialized workshops in the evenings (the most recent of which was a computer animation class in which a group of middle schoolers wrote and created their own animated short film), we also host writing-intensive field trips in the mornings, send teams of volunteers into the schools, help with student publications, and publish, as much as we can, the student writing that's produced here. We are the second chapter of six to open across the country—the others are in Ann Arbor, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Seattle, as well as the original center in San Francisco. This month we're opening a satellite tutoring center in the Williamsburg branch of the Brooklyn Public Library,

hopefully the beginning of a long collaboration. All of these programs are volunteer-run and completely free.

But all this is is not what initially attracts people, both young and old, to the center. It's our storefront, The Brooklyn Superhero Supply Co. (B.S.S.Co.), that catches their attention. From the outside, the store looks like a tire repair shop with an overly excited sense of advertising. The massive awning is jammed with marketing phrases that attest to the quality of the business: "If we don't have it a superhero doesn't need it"; "One stop for all of your foe-battling needs"; "The choice of many well-regarded BKLYN superheroes"; "Sidekick Placement Services—Fast & reliable." Inside, capes, masks, and grappling hooks are all for sale, as are cans of antimatter, secret identity kits, two-handle suction cups, and a wide selection of utility belts. There are different lines of products, each with its own marketing copy: Mount Fortress, a company that sells sporty clothes for heroes (leotards, briefs, hosiery); Aardvark Brothers, an old-fashioned family-run superhero supplier that puts quality before all else (especially when it comes to their truth serum); and Mer Systems, which specializes in products for aquatic heroes. Each line has its own logo, and each product has its own copy, all the way down to the fine print.

Before author and *McSweeney's* editor Dave Eggers founded 826 Valencia, the original 826 writing center/pirate supply store that's named for its street address in San Francisco, the building was a gutted weight lifting gym. The San Francisco center, which first set up the model of a retail store/writing center, started by simply offering free after-school homework help by volunteers—who were largely Bay Area writers. All of the subsequent 826 (pronounced *eight-two-six*) chapters follow this model of free volunteer-run programming, but each center has its own unique storefront theme (in Chicago, it's spy gear; in Seattle, supplies for those going into space; in Ann Arbor, it's a union for monsters; and the Los Angeles center will be an Internet store for time travelers).

Recently, I started to ask myself why someone like Matt is so drawn to our center, why he gives up a good portion of his weekend to spend time here. The simple answer is that it's a safe place: there are plenty of people around to listen and help, the walls are a warm, deep red, there are sofas and free computers and open wooden desks. We all know him, he knows us—we are a community. But there is more to it. Matt, who is an ambitious young man, and the only one of his friends working on a novel, seems, like all ambitious young people, to be full of grand ideas and aspirations. Thus what draws him to us week after week is the fact that we're an organization that encourages his most impractical and far-reaching ideas. If he wants to write a comic novel at age 16, we say yes, do it, and we will help. If he wants it to be the first in a series of novels, we say even better. If he wants to drop 3,000 copies of the first chapter from a blimp over Midtown, we'll talk about it, and start looking into blimp rentals.

This belief in making the impractical possible, this almost Willy Wonka-like sense of the world, is not only what attracts young people to the center, it's what attracts the adults, writers themselves, to volunteer to teach, tutor, copy-edit, run the store, and take out the garbage. It's the exact same spirit that one must have to embark on a writing career or any ambitious project—faith, some might call it, in the impractical, in a world where anything is possible.

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Before I go any further, I should admit that I have no journalistic distance from the organization. I was a member of the original group that met in a tavern off of New York's Union Square to talk about how to open a writing center here that, like 826 Valencia, would offer volunteer-run programming at no charge to students. At the time, 826 Valencia had been running for nearly two years. Its model of utilizing the free daytime hours of local freelance writers, graduate students, and artists seemed a perfect fit for New York City, particularly parts of Brooklyn. (11215, our zip code, supposedly has the most working novelists of any other in the country.) We knew we had the volunteer resources to make a program like this work, and that there was an abundant need for no-cost independent after-school and extracurricular programming in the city. The five of us, some of whom had worked together for the *McSweeney's* literary magazine, sat around dirty wooden tables discussing not permits, funding, and insurance policies, but madcap ideas for a superhero supply store: e.g, a cape tester, and an entrance through a swinging bookshelf.

It was understood at these meetings that although we had little funding, no space, and no staff, if somehow we just pushed forward, the money, the volunteers, and the community support would follow. Although we knew that for every 60 funny ideas we scribbled on napkins, only about three were actually possible, we were confident that the five of us could make those three strange, money-flushing ideas happen.

Not three months later we were in a storefront in Park Slope at 3 a.m. on a Monday desperately trying to figure out the correct angle of the fans on the cape tester. During the binge of building the store—when we all worked full-time jobs elsewhere—there were many nights like this. In a gutted sporting goods store, we figured out how to put up drywall and tile floors, how to mix epoxy and talk to Brooklyn landlords. (“It’s going to be a bookstore, kinda like Barnes & Noble!”)

The night that we built the cape tester, I stood on the grated metal platform that we had ordered from an industrial supplier, with fans underneath that we’d attached by wire and five floodlights overhead that were rigged to come on with the fans. Wearing a cape, I instructed those below on how to angle the wind. The problem of getting the right billow had become so frustrating (“We need more fans,” someone concluded, “like attic fans.”) that none of us noticed the small crowd gathered outside, staring. Most were patrons of a nearby bar who had stepped outside for a smoke, but since it was a warm night in May, there were also people with dogs, someone with a stroller, and, strangely for a weeknight at this hour, a few kids from the neighborhood. Just wait and see! I wanted to tell them. You’ll get it— it’s all for the kids! I put my hands on my hips and faced forward, the cape finally whipping behind me. Just look confident, stick your chest out, smile.

“Guys, I think we’ve got it,” I said, maintaining the pose. I raised one arm over my head, then two, and feeling how absurd I must’ve looked, pretended to fly.

When we were closing up, a boy not more than 12 appeared outside, leaning back on a parked car. It was close to 4 a.m. and now everything was closed. The boy stared at us as we filed out, arms crossed on his chest. He had seen me

on the cape tester and was unimpressed. “Hey,” he said to Sam, our designer, “what’s this place gonna be?” “A superhero supply store.” The boy frowned, looked at the empty storefront, then shook his head. “Neeever gonna make it,” he said.

These were the children we were to serve. Kids who grow up in New York City are notoriously unsheltered, savvy, and, like this one—awake at 4 a.m.—able to grasp at an early age the limitations of the adult world. He had seen restaurants and bodegas and hair salons come and go. He knew things, like how expensive the real estate was, what the neighborhood needed, and how quickly it was changing.

The day in early June when the awning went up was one of more double-takes and crowds. Within 15 minutes, the landlord was there in his Mercedes asking to see Scott, our executive director. The landlord, a Brooklyn native who now owned several buildings, many of them check-cashing establishments, was confused. What happened to the bookstore? Was this some kind of joke? More importantly, could we make the rent? Scott sat in the back of the Mercedes with him and explained as best he could. The landlord chewed on his cigar (I kid you not), and asked again about the rent. Yes, Scott assured him, it would be on time.

Much to everyone’s astonishment—including our own—the store has made enough money to cover the rent each month. Our staff has grown from one to five full-time employees in the last two years and our programming has expanded to serve nearly three times the number of students it did when we first opened. While we are funded partially by foundations and private donations, the majority of our first two years’ funding has come from an extensive series of benefit readings, comedy and rock shows as well as benefit books—David Sedaris, Nick Hornby, and Zadie Smith have all edited anthologies for us and donated the proceeds to the center. These methods, while somewhat unconventional, have been the best way to use the available resource of the many talented and generous artists who, while not necessarily having the deepest pockets themselves, could donate their time and names to raise money. In many ways, our fundraising strategies remain as mad-cap as ever. (Our last event was a fashion show for superheroes, where people bid on new capes and boots for crimefighters). But it’s the goofiness that brings in paying audiences and more active volunteers.

When we opened the writing center that first fall, drop-in tutoring was soon full of local kids, most between ages six and twelve, worldly and cynical as the city itself. The first few months were a barrage of questions: Did the hydrogen gum really work? What about the suction cups? What would happen if you opened a can of antimatter? Our staff and volunteers have become remarkably savvy at answering such questions. Children, even New York children, want to engage in imaginary worlds, and do so naturally. I believe that when you extend this to the real world, you are instilling in them not a delusion, but an inherent optimism—a bridge into the realm of possibility. Our work may not create a generation of writers, however nice that would be. Our ambition is a generation of optimists and risk-takers, who realize that they can make a world of their own choosing.

During the first few weeks of drop-in, we started encouraging the students to write stories when they were done with their homework, a suggestion they first shrugged off as more work. But the few who finished saw us publish their stories the same day in small, tape-bound books. Soon so many were writing stories that we were able to put together a literary journal that collected work from all of our programs. The

first issue of *The 826NYC Review* is over 250 pages, perfect-bound, and designed as though it were *The Paris Review* or *Granta*.

Abed, a nine-year-old regular at drop-in whose exceptional baby fat has earned him the nickname "Cheeks" among the staff, had an aversion to reading but loved writing stories. Curious by nature and hugely imaginative, Abed wrote so many strange tales about river rats, kings, and leprechauns that he became the subject of the first "826NYC Interview"—which, like those in *The Paris Review*, focuses on the author's craft. When I told Abed that I wanted to interview him, he was unfazed. "About what?" he said over a math worksheet. "Your stories that are in the *Review*. I want to ask you about writing them. 'Cause, you know, you're an author now." "I know," he said.

A few minutes later he sat down next to me on the sofa, clasped his hands behind his head, and leaned back. For the interview I asked him to wear the author glasses, a pair of thick Clark Kent frames that everyone, famous writers to six-year-olds, is asked to wear when photographed in the center. They dwarfed his round face but he sat back comfortably and crossed his legs. We covered his writing process (he writes with a pencil mostly because "Pencils are strong!"); his affinity for princesses ("I think they can do more than sit on crumpets all day."); and his desire to go to Loch Ness ("The Monster lives deep in these underwater caves where they bury the Scottish warriors."). But then Abed really hit his stride:

826NYC: "Have you heard of Marcel Proust?"

Abed: Yup.

826NYC: Wow. OK, well you know he spent his entire life writing one really long book. If you were to spend your whole life writing ten thousand pages about something, what would it be?

Abed: Dragons, of course.