



The Oregonian

826 Valencia: Pirates, writers in training

Sunday, February 24, 2008

The Oregonian

SAN FRANCISCO -- For the professional buccaneer, there's really no question as to where to go for the best in affordable pirate supplies. At 826 Valencia in the Mission District, there are eye patches, parrots, peg legs, hook protectors and planks by the foot. There are helpful guides on the pirates' code of ethics ("Cannons Shall Not Be Fired in Vain") and unacceptable slang ("Well, tickle my pits").

And scrawled on the blackboard just inside the door is this timely warning: "Do Not Attempt to Bridle Your Awe."

You can't. Not after looking behind the curtain at the back of the shop and seeing San Francisco's only independent pirate supply store for what it really is: a nonprofit writing center, book publisher and tutoring program for hundreds of kids.

826 Valencia is the cornerstone of Dave Eggers' entertaining and innovative efforts to engage students in the joy of reading and writing. When he came to Portland for last year's Wordstock Festival, Eggers -- author of "A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius" -- told several hundred teachers that writing "is not magic and lightning bolts and unicorns. It's work."

At 826 Valencia, it just feels like all of the above.

The storefront is one of seven writing and tutoring centers around the country that come disguised -- transparently, of course -- as retail stores. The "826" in New York is Brooklyn Superhero Supply, which traffics in secret ID kits. Seattle has the Greenwood Space Travel Supply Co., Chicago a spy store, and Boston the Greater Boston Bigfoot Research Institute.

Portland, sadly, is still out of the 826 loop.

The vision for 826 came to Eggers while he was living in Brooklyn and working on his first book. As he watched a local amateur taxidermy supply store evolve into a hangout for middle-schoolers, he realized he could use similarly idiosyncratic storefronts to pull kids off the street and really give them something to write home about.

He opened 826 Valencia in 2002, and the nonprofit has taken wing. On field trips to the store, two dozen grade-schoolers are invited to produce a children's story for the notorious Mr. Blue, the editor who weighs 600 pounds and is covered in boils --like so many editors -- and lives in the attic above the store.

The disembodied voice of Mr. Blue demands original material and he invariably gets it. "You can't stop (the students)," Eggers said in Portland. "They work feverishly. We hold them to incredible standards, and they always come through."

Professional illustrators and binders at 826 Valencia then help the kids deliver the final product, complete with author photos on the back cover, to their editor. Producing a book may never seem so daunting again.

Behind the Jolly Rogers, the message bottles and the "fish theater" -- three chairs and an aquarium -- there are, literally, more than a thousand tutors available to help students with their afternoon homework. There are writing labs, jazz and poetry workshops, language programs, summer camps, comedy nights, and guest speakers such as Michael Chabon and Spike Jonze.

Small wonder that most of the staff at 826 Valencia are living that old Steve Martin line: "And I get paid for doing this."

"Not only is it a whimsical and goofy," says Dan Weiss, 23, who mans the gangplank and the register, "but there's the connection with the kids. I'll walk down Mission or Valencia and see these kids with their families, and they're waving to me. That feels good, too."

I bet it does. And I can only imagine how much better it would feel if we were walking down Albina or Burnside or Beaverton-Hillsdale and the writing stars of 826 Portland were waving at us.

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