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Whimsical tutoring center blasts off in Seattle

By Cara Solomon
Seattle Times reporter

Churches offered their basements. Community clubs offered spare rooms. But Teri Hein could not, in good conscience, say yes to any of it.

She wanted this free tutoring center of hers to be kind of a wild, whimsical space for kids. She wanted, specifically, to design it around the theme of space travel.

"You just wouldn't know if they'd let you put an atomic teleporter in," said Hein, 52, a longtime teacher and published author. "I just didn't want to negotiate that."

The tutoring center, called 826 Seattle, held its grand opening on Greenwood Avenue North yesterday, pulling people of all ages in through its new, space-travel-themed storefront. The inspiration for the project comes from the author Dave Eggers, who co-founded a similar walk-in tutoring center called 826 Valencia in San Francisco. That center has a storefront with pirate paraphernalia on sale, with proceeds going back into the center's work.

There are several centers, from New York to Los Angeles, tied to the 826 National organization. In each one, the storefront is designed to send a message: This is not your average tutoring center. This is a creative, kid-driven space, welcoming to anyone who wants homework help and a sense of home.

The focus is on writing, with workshops on everything from how to write a comic book to how to write music reviews. An upcoming workshop is called "Creative Whining." Students will write a plea for something they want, then the plea will be judged by adults.

Open to all students

Hein is not particularly interested in creating the next generation of writers and poets. She is focused instead on giving kids the power of the written word. The tutoring services are open to all students, whether the child is advanced or struggling with basic English grammar.



BETTY UDESEN / THE SEATTLE TIMES
Teri Hein, left, applauds a young author's reading at Saturday's grand opening of 826 Seattle, a free tutoring center she founded.



BETTY UDESEN / THE SEATTLE TIMES
Author Dave Eggers, talks with 15-year-old Michael Litvin after Litvin's reading of his work. Describing his feelings after the conversation, Litvin said, "I was a little teeny bit 'out of body'. He's a really good writer and he said some good stuff about my work." Eggers gave a list of authors to the young author, authors whose work he said had a similarity in style to that which Litvin read.

Free tutoring and homework help

826 Seattle offers free tutoring and homework help.

All ages: 3-5 p.m. Sunday-Thursday

Teenagers: 5:30-7:30 p.m. Sunday-Thursday

General Information

Address: 826 Seattle, 8414 Greenwood Avenue N. (P.O. Box 30764), Seattle, WA 98103

Phone: 206-725-2625

Web site: www.826seattle.org

E-mail address: info@826seattle.org

Donations: 206-725-2625 or donations@826seattle.org

Volunteer inquiries: 206-725-2625 or volunteer@826seattle.org

Eggers attended Saturday's open house as a celebrity, famous for his 2000 book, "A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius," and for the literary journal he created, McSweeney's. The day's events included readings by four members of the center's Youth Advisory Board, and performances by bands of their own choosing. The band Natalie Portman's Shaved Head made its debut, with a sound so distinctive that Eggers stopped midsentence at one point to marvel.

"There are probably some parents out there who feel horrified," said Eggers, from his seat in the back office. "This is the point — the kids own it."

But this center is run by Hein, a woman whose work has inspired Eggers for years. He first met her at the Hutch School, where she taught for many years. That school, which she helped to transform, caters to kids who are being treated at the Seattle Cancer Care Alliance, or whose relatives are being treated there.

The place felt free, Eggers said, and creative, and warm in a way that many schools do not. When Hein left the Hutch School and began talking about starting her own tutoring center, Eggers suggested it become a branch of his organization, 826 National.

In the past few years, more than a dozen cities have applied to host branches, but Eggers said he evaluates applications with care. The centers require so much commitment.

"Everything has to be homegrown," Eggers said. "And the person at the top has to be extraordinary."

He praised Hein's drive and her skill. But beyond that, Eggers said, she gives kids the respect they deserve. The students on the advisory board described her Saturday as an easy kind of adult, someone they did not have to strain to please. They called her a friend.

"From the minute I met her, she made me feel like I was a really important part of the whole thing," said Claire England, 16, a student at the Center School in Seattle.

A pole named Bill

Hein got the idea for a tutoring center called Studio 26 more than three years ago, mulling over the possibilities, touring potential sites, interviewing several people who had started nonprofit groups on their own.

"I really had no idea what I was doing," she said. "And I just kept doing it." She has 826 Seattle running now on the strength of about 60 volunteers, including professional writers. Already more than 400 people have turned in applications, hoping to help. The project is funded through private donations and grants, and supported by the considerable star power of Eggers.

Over the past several months, dozens of volunteers have made 826 Seattle come alive. An installation artist created the movie that runs in the storefront. A carpenter put up walls where there'd been none before. A real rocket scientist wrote a mathematical formula on a chalkboard that hangs on one of the walls.

Visitors to the storefront Saturday found fanciful products for sale, from the silver canisters of "Rocket Fuel" to packets with "Personality Altering Chips" inside. There were brown bottles of liquid, labeled "Certainty" and "Uncertainty," to be swallowed in different situations in space. Small, slender metal suitcases became "Emergency Tool Kits" and a revolving photo darkroom door served as an "Atomic Transporter."

The packaging for each product was designed by a graphic artist, and a team of writers came up with every label. For his work as project manager, freelance writer Paul Hughes was told Saturday he had a wall named in his honor.

"It was exciting," said Hughes, referring to the Paul Wall. "I've never had a wall named after me before."

Children walked through the darkroom door to the tutoring center, which had touches of creativity in every corner. There were mock-serious signs: "Do not remove this sign" and "No smoking within 25 yards of a pencil." Clocks on the wall told the time in West Seattle, Rainier Beach, Lake City and Greenwood.

Then there was the pole named Bill.

That particular idea came from the Youth Advisory Board. They decided to give the pole a name just because. And to their surprise, the adults said yes.

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