



TELLING TALES

If you come across this PIRATE'S SHOPPING HEAVEN in your search for the perfect eye patch, you'll soon find there's MORE TO IT than meets the eye.

WORDS NICOLE THOMAS

Located on Valencia St in the heart of San Francisco's Mission District, the Pirate Supply Store is a shop stocked with all kinds of goodies for those of the seafaring inclination. Think treatments for scurvy, monkey leashes and whale-belly escape kits.

This might seem odd and in fact extraordinarily niche, but for tens of thousands of children, the Pirate Supply Store is far more than walls of ocean-faring goodness. The Pirate Supply Store is the retail facade of 826 Valencia, now a chapter of 826 National, a not-for-profit initiative that helps nurture the confidence and written skills of under-privileged and marginalised kids.

Even Gerald Richards, CEO of 826 National, was floored when he realised what lay beyond the oddities of the store.

"I had no idea what was going on until I walked into my interview [for the CEO role]. The kids were in the back and I looked at it and I was like, 'Oh, this makes perfect sense to me.'"

Founded by award-winning author Dave Eggers and educator Ninive Calegari, 826 Valencia started in a bid to nurture the creativity of under-resourced students in San Francisco's Bay Area. After-school tutoring and workshops were held with an aim of bringing imagination back to education. And while the focus may be on under-privileged kids, all students aged between six and 18 are welcome.

"In our writing workshops, especially in our evening workshops, you get a mix of kids," says Gerald. "You get kids from under-privileged backgrounds, privileged backgrounds, and then they all come in and it's an equaliser. They intermingle and it gives them a chance to forge relationships around writing."

Since 826 Valencia's inception in 2002, the idea has spread across seven cities in the US; each with its own wonderful and bizarre shop front, with all the profits fed straight back into the affiliated 826 workshop. Bonded together under the umbrella of 826 National, which provides administrative and leadership support, each chapter is a beacon of creative

IMAGES COURTESY OF 826 NATIONAL

light in an education sector that is increasingly straying from the arts.

"I'm a huge proponent of needing more creativity in education. We need more arts education, music. We don't want a group of young people who don't know how to communicate, who don't know how to relate to the world, don't know how to create, don't know how to notice beauty, don't know how to innovate and come up with new concepts, how to imagine things being different," says Gerald.

He adds that they recently produced a book which was a combination of STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) education and writing. "That connection [between disciplines] has to exist."

Gerald is quick to note that the 826 volunteers set the foundations for kids' confidence and burgeoning appreciation for writing.

"I think it's the connection to the caring adults and the volunteers. There is no judgement at 826. We'll work on your story over time and edit and get to the best version, but from the beginning it's just about putting words on paper and telling us what your ideas are. None of your ideas are silly. If you want to write about chocolate rabbits, write about chocolate rabbits. I think that helps with confidence," explains Gerald.

It's not uncommon for those volunteers to come in the form of literary and pop culture royalty. Currently, the organisation can name authors Isabel Allende, Michael Chabon and Junot Diaz, as well as celebrities such as Judd Apatow and the late Robin Williams, as collaborators. And it's these volunteers, celebrity or otherwise, that drive the organisation.

"Being able to tap into this community spirit that people have, and give them

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THE MANY FACES OF 826 NATIONAL

Each 826 National centre is fronted by its very own shop, which is not only a brilliantly quirky and covert facade for the kids, but a wonderland for creative types of all ages.

- 826 Los Angeles:** Echo Park Time Travel Mart and Mar Vista Time Travel Mart
- 826 Boston:** The Greater Boston Bigfoot Research Institute
- 826 Chicago:** The Wicker Park Secret Agent Supply Co.
- 826 New York City:** Brooklyn Superhero Supply Co.
- 826 San Francisco:** Pirate Supply Store
- 826 Michigan:** Liberty Street Robot Supply and Repair Shop
- 826 Washington D.C.:** The Museum of Unnatural History

the ability to get involved with kids in the community, is really powerful," says Gerald. "The world gets busier and busier and somehow our volunteers,

these amazing people, take two hours out of their day and volunteer with some kids down the street to work on their writing."

As well as the myriad benefits for the students, the not-for-profit proves that an idea fuelled by conviction and backed

by a passionate community is next to unstoppable. Especially when fronted by a pirate. ■

SYDNEY STORY FACTORY

826 NATIONAL WAS THE INSPIRATION FOR THIS LITERARY INITIATIVE

Set in the heart of Sydney's inner city suburb of Redfern, an unassuming storefront stocks Puny Humans and Flying Saucer Repair Kits. The Martian Embassy and Gift Shop is the retail facade for the Sydney Story Factory. The organisation, inspired by 826 Valencia and founded by journalists Catherine Keenan and Tim Dick, seeks to help under-resourced children become more confident and comfortable with the written word and aims to nurture their creativity. The initiative has collaborated with local Australian talent including Markus Zusak, Debra Adelaide, Peter FitzSimons, Drusilla Modjeska and Malcolm Knox. As with 826 National, the Sydney Story Factory is a not-for-profit that relies on local support in the form of donations and volunteers. sydneystoryfactory.org.au

