

826LA's "Tell Me a Story" Benefit Supports Programs for Young Writers

 laweekly.com/arts/826las-tell-me-a-story-benefit-supports-programs-for-young-writers-9520358

June 1, 2018



826LA student Katherine and Jimmy Kimmel at the annual "Tell Me a Story" fundraiser; this year's edition is on Wednesday.

Farhad Parsa

[Erica Blumfield](#) | June 1, 2018 | 11:14am

If you're feeling powerless over the state of the country, including our education secretary's inane opinions and policy ideas; fed up with the lack of funding allotted to the most underserved schools across America; and dismayed by the constant threat of more massive budget cuts, you can do something about it. On Wednesday, June 6, 826LA will hold its annual benefit at Vibiana, celebrating ever-important voices of children and raising funds for its programs. This year's event, "Tell Me a Story: Untold Stories of Los Angeles." will feature Jimmy Kimmel, Xosha Roquemore, Danny Trejo, Reggie Watts, Benjamin Booker and L.A. Poet Laureate Robin Coste Lewis.

826LA provides free and accessible programming, including creative and expository writing workshops and after-school tutoring, to children and teens in kindergarten through high school at its centers, 826LA and the Time Travel Marts in Echo Park and Mar Vista, and in-school programs at LAUSD. The nonprofit also publishes approximately 300 titles each year featuring its remarkable young students' writing works.

Los Angeles Poet Laureate Robin Coste Lewis will read at "Tell Me a Story" on Wednesday, June 6.

826LA

"The funds raised at the benefit will support 826LA's free writing programs and will also help us support and launch more Writers' Rooms inside of LAUSD schools," Joel Arquillos, executive director of 826LA, tells *L.A. Weekly*. "Our Writers' Room at Manual Arts supports teachers and students with writing projects, college personal statements and scholarships and serves as a resource for curriculum development. We are looking to open at least two more of these rooms in the next few years."



826LA encourages children's thoughts, feelings, dreams and imagination to soar, and each student's unique voice is fostered and nurtured. Young writers grow confident they can delight with humor, console pain, inspire hope and ignite contemplation, and that their creativity and self-expression can effect change. Students acquire vital skills, leading them to excel inside and outside of school.

Seven-year-old 826LA student Yatzel T. offers her perspective on Los Angeles in a poem. Her vision is a reminder that even in these troubled times, there is hope and beauty all around us.

Los Angeles Love

Love one sky Angels...

...Let's

Eat the Sunset

Los Angeles is the best amazing world of America.

I like all the people because they are all my sisters and brothers.

826LA is an offshoot of 826National, which grew out of the first chapter of the organization, 826 Valencia in San Francisco, opened in 2002 by Dave Eggers, an acclaimed author and founder of McSweeney's publishing house, and award-winning educator Nínive Calegari. There are now eight chapters of 826 National, with locations in Boston, Chicago, Washington, D.C., Michigan, New Orleans and New York.

“It definitely grew at an unexpected pace. When we opened in San Francisco, the place was just meant to be half a tutoring center and half the McSweeney’s offices. Then it grew so fast McSweeney’s got kicked out and moved across the street. Then New York and L.A. opened in rapid succession, driven by local organizers in each city,” Eggers tells *L.A. Weekly*. “I remember first moving into the SPARC space in Venice. We had rented part of the second floor, and there were bars on the windows, because, of course, it was a former jail. One of the volunteers managed to dress up the windows to make them less ominous, and we put down new Ikea floors — I had to rent a convertible to carry the floorboards; they were too tall to fit in a regular car — and when we got the floors down and walls painted, it started looking like a very inviting place.



826National co-founder Dave Eggers at the "Tell Me a Story" event that benefits 826LA locations in Echo Park and Mar Vista.

Farhad Parsa

“But the fact that 826LA now has over 30 staffers and serves about 10,000 students a year — that’s beyond what we could have imagined for the organization,” Eggers adds. “All credit goes to Joel Arquillos, the former executive director, Mac Barnett, the board and the staff and volunteers. They took that initial second-floor space and grew it into this thriving and ever-growing beacon of hope and weirdness.”

The largest publication 826LA released this year, *Through the Same Halls: Journeys of Elders Born and Raised in South Central and Beyond*, is a collection of true stories written by 55 students from Manual Arts High School in South Los Angeles; they interviewed elders from

their community, schools and families.

According to Arquillos, “Publishing is not only how we can show the world what amazing stories young people have to share but it’s how we show our students that their voices matter.”

The foreword to *Through the Same Halls* was written by Donald Bakeer, a former English teacher at Manual Arts and author of the novel *South Central L.A. CRIPS*, which inspired the 1992 film *South Central*.

“By writing about the experiences of their elders, these students have captured, anecdotally, a history of Mexico, Central America and, indeed, South Central L.A. that is undervalued and mostly overlooked. After seeing their writing published, these students will never feel disempowered vis-à-vis the English language, again,” Bakeer wrote in the foreword.

Cameron H., a Young Authors’ Book Project student author and contributor to *Through the Same Halls*, explains why he chose his grandmother, Mary Brown, as his elder even though she died before he was born. “Her life intrigued me, even though I never got to meet her in person. ... She really had a tough time but she persevered.” Through stories his mother told him about his grandmother, he came to know her, be inspired by her and found a kindred spirit. “Listening to how my grandma was and how I am now makes me think we’re almost the same person.”

As a woman of color, his grandmother endured a great deal of prejudice throughout her life. She also participated in the MLK demonstration in Chicago and bravely came out as gay to her church congregation.

Although it’s been more than half a century since the civil rights movement began, Cameron is acutely aware of the ever-present and aggressive racism happening throughout the country. Of his own experience he writes, “I’ve constantly been pulled over by police officers, I’ve been banged on and shot at by gangbangers, and have been racially profiled in a clothing store.”

Yet, like his grandmother, he perseveres.

“With all of these experiences, I could’ve turned out worse, but I didn’t. I know what I want to be in life and these little bumps won’t knock my focus off track.

“I feel like she would be proud of me,” he says of his grandmother.

Besides attending Wednesday night’s benefit, those interesting in supporting 826LA can donate or volunteer for its programs or with design, copy editing, web and tech support, and events and marketing.

“I started volunteering with 826LA three years ago, looking to give back and connect with my local community. Every time I volunteer, I leave in a better mood than I entered with. It has been the most rewarding experience,” 826LA volunteer Kristina Gsell tells *L.A. Weekly*. “I am always amazed by how much the kids give me in return, and the great pride and joy that comes with working with them. I can’t recommend volunteering with 826LA enough.”

Take back the power, have some laughs, even some tears and be inspired at 826LA benefit “Tell Me a Story: Untold Stories of Los Angeles,” Wednesday, June 6, 6:30-9:30 p.m., at Vibiana, downtown Los Angeles. Tickets are available [here](#). Information on volunteering with 826LA can be found [here](#).

AdaptCC