



Miles Portek

STORYTELLER. GENTLE GIANT. CREATIVE SOUL.

by Mindy Fried, Ph.D. of Arbor Consulting Partners

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It’s 9:30AM and a busload of twenty-five third graders from the Thomas Dooley School in Queens is stuck in traffic en route to their field trip at 826NYC in Brooklyn. Their teacher calls from the bus to say they’re thinking about turning back. “We really hope you can make it,” replies the 826NYC program coordinator, her voice a mixture of encouragement and concern.

Today’s field trip is about storytelling and bookmaking, led by 826NYC volunteer and master storyteller, Miles Portek, who has put in a full 250 volunteer hours in the one year he’s worked with 826NYC. Amidst a quiet tension, 826NYC staff wait inside while Miles calmly stands in front of the center, ready to greet the arriving bus on this busy Brooklyn street. To everyone’s relief, around ten minutes later, a group of noisy and expectant students bursts into the 826NYC storefront, the Brooklyn Superhero Supply Co., ready for some action. They are in for a treat.

Miles is a tall, gentle man from Australia who sports a full beard and a deep, resonant voice that emits warmth and a touch of whimsy. He is drawn to working with children, he says, because they “still have optimism and joy and no boundaries and great ideas about robots and dinosaurs and aliens.” Miles also has a background in improvisation and comedy.

Moving to a small platform inside the storefront, he is clearly in his element, as he welcomes the class to the Brooklyn Superhero Supply Co., where students are surrounded by shelves of cans filled with superhero supplies like truth serum, and a costume area that features superhero accessories like capes. Miles queries the students, “Are you ready to go into the secret writing library?” And they spontaneously shout, “YES!” Miles asks them to line up in front of a large bookshelf that offers no obvious sign of entrance, and then pulls a hidden door that magically opens to the creative writing center.

With a collective gasp, the students are like Alice as they step through the looking glass and, one-by-one, are greeted personally



826NYC volunteer, Miles Portek, with field trip third grader. Photo credit: Cage Free Productions.

by Miles. To one girl, he asks, “What is your favorite animal?” and when she replies, “Rabbit,” he asks her why, and she says, “Because they’re very fast,” and he probes, “Can you run fast?” He asks a boy if he’s ready to write a story today, and when the boy says “Yes,” Miles wants to know his “number one story idea.” Miles takes his time with each child, while those who have entered have their author photos taken by an 826NYC staffer which later appear on the books they will take home.

Students quietly get situated in chairs that face a front stage area where Miles will soon engage them in collaborative story writing for the next hour. And when everyone is finally seated, Miles walks to the front of the room and addresses them formally, saying, “Welcome to the secret writing library. It’s lovely to have you all here.”

Storytelling and Bookmaking

Storytelling and Bookmaking is one of 826’s most popular field trips among its network of tutoring centers across the country, attracting classrooms from elementary and middle schools from all over the area. The overall goal—in this intensive, two-hour



field trip—is to get students excited about writing, and feel that they, too, can be writers. Miles’ job this morning—with the help of a typist, illustrator, and a fictional, never-seen publisher called Ms. Mildew—is to help the class of third graders produce a complete story that is then printed and bound in-house.

Miles began volunteering a number of years ago at an 826-inspired organization in Australia called the Sydney Story Factory. “I’d done drop-in writing stuff, working with kids, and I worked in after-school care for a bit.” He found out about the 826 network when he watched a TED talk by the organization’s co-founder, Dave Eggers, and was inspired. “The thing that really hit home was when he said it doesn’t matter if you have one hour or if you have 10 hours when you volunteer. All that matters is that you focus on that kid because it could be the only time that a kid has an adult telling them that what they’re doing is cool.”

Miles says to the class, “Let’s make a list of things in a good story,” and one student calls out, excitedly, “Things I can’t believe, like things that don’t really talk in real life, but they talk in a book.” As he and others toss out ideas, they watch their words projected on a screen by an unseen typist who writes as they speak. Others chime in: “A villain,” “A hero,” “A person who narrates,” “A princess.” And with each idea, Miles repeats the words and reminds them that they’re working on elements of a good story. “A problem, a solution!” says one student, and Miles says, “Yes, exactly.”

Miles believes in positive reinforcement, whether it’s while he’s helping students with homework or during these field trips. “When kids are saying ideas for a story and someone says ‘A body paragraph and an introduction and a glossary in the conclusion,’ none of them are in the stories, but you don’t want to stomp on a kid’s idea then, because if you do, they’re not going to keep contributing. So it’s all about communicating, ‘Yes, that’s a great idea,’ and we try to fit as much of that in, because a lot of times, kids just want to be acknowledged, and want to see their ideas matter in reality and [are] built upon, and be told, ‘Yeah, I did a good job.’”



Miles and a group of students on a Storytelling and Bookmaking field trip at 826NYC. Photo credit: Cage Free Productions.

Courtney Lindwall, 826NYC’s Programs Associate and coordinator for the Field Trip Program, says, “Miles gets students excited. They come in and they have really low energy... And then all of a sudden Miles comes up, and he’s funny and he’s got this funny Australian accent and he’s saying funny things and all of a sudden the energy just rises.”

“Miles makes writing fun,” comments Cutter Wood, 826NYC’s former Volunteer Coordinator. “The Field Trip Program is the DNA of 826. Miles embodies that. It’s never a duty for him.” Miles is one of 250 volunteers who work at 826NYC—a diverse group of individuals who are writers, teachers, artists and more. Cutter says, “It’s impossible to talk about 826 without talking about the volunteers. What makes the volunteers great is that they give their time and invest themselves.” The dream, when you’re running an organization that depends on a large volunteer pool, he says, is to have reliable volunteers who are exemplary. “They’re partners with us in nourishing the voices of the young people who come to us. And that’s what we strive for and what we really achieve. It’s been terrific to see so many adults become so enthusiastic about the work of children.”

The writing process

After students brainstorm a “list of things in a good story,” Miles asks how they can explain things using their senses, offering an example: “If you say there’s a wall, that’s not so interesting, but if you say there’s a sticky wall that is oozing blood and it smells like...” and one student immediately calls out “YUCK!” to which Miles replies, “We have expert storytellers here!”

Miles explains to the class that they will write the first part of a story together, but will end with a “cliffhanger,” at which point it’s up to the students to write their own endings. He introduces students to his “boss,” the ill-tempered publisher, Ms. Mildew, whose craggy, creepy voice comes through an intercom, as she questions, “What’s going on up there?!” Miles responds somewhat submissively, “Yes, Ms. Mildew? We’re about to get started writing! We’ll get you books soon.” Ms. Mildew barks back, “Well, you better!” Miles tells the students that every time Ms. Mildew talks to them, she likes to hear that they love her. An infectious titter moves through the group, and at the count of three, Miles leads the class in shouting “We LOVE you, Ms. Mildew!” to which Ms. Mildew crabbily replies, “Hrmp!”

Students begin to brainstorm a list of characters, as Miles tells the class that Ms. Mildew only likes original characters: “No SpongeBob, no Hello Kitty, no Superman, no Dora the Explorer.” Students laugh. “They can be animals; they can even be a toilet brush,” says Miles. There is more laughter from students. “Yes! A toilet brush,” he declares, paving the way for students to explore the outlandish.

For the next half hour, they put together elements of a story. At times, their enthusiasm comes to a crescendo, as they throw out



a mountain of ideas. But before they get overwhelmed, Miles asks them to vote on this or that idea, and the class spontaneously applauds when a decision is made. The process unfolds naturally, as students begin to organically create a collective narrative. They agree that the main character in the story is called "Spiderzilla," a crazy spider who's going to eat everyone and take over the world. When Miles tells the class they need to determine a setting, he asks the class, "Are you ready to have your minds blown? It can be a place or it can be a time," and hands shoot up, as students call out eagerly: "2099: the future." "1917: the past." "A magic kingdom." "Space!" They vote, and the winning setting is "Spiderworld." Miles says, "This is going to be a fantastic story," and the children eagerly lean forward in their seats, ready to move on.

High-quality volunteers

Former Volunteer Coordinator Cutter says, "You get the sense that Miles loves self-expression and he takes great pleasure in hearing the work of our young people and seeing them be creative." 826NYC provides an orientation to all of their volunteers, using a well-written and accessible training manual. Volunteers are drawn to certain programming and roles, based on their skills and expertise. "Our primary goal in leading a field trip is to get a complete narrative and to provide understanding about the structure of a narrative," says Cutter. "How they do that is up to them and it's up to their imagination. We strive for that in our volunteer recruitment, and we strive for that in the culture of 826, and it just so happens that Miles' background has made him a natural."

Miles says that he inherited a "lack of shame" from his dad, "so I don't care so much about looking stupid out and about." He has performed at the Melbourne Comedy Festival, played a leadership role at New South Wales University where he spoke to large crowds of students, and hosted trivia contests and bingo nights when he wasn't working at the university. Miles is as comfortable performing on-stage as he is leading field trips.

Nina Chiappetta, an 826NYC intern, says she learned how to do the Storytelling and Bookmaking field trip through working with Miles. She had the distinction of playing the character of Ms. Mildew, but was feeling nervous. "They were fourth and fifth graders who were very excited. The entire time I was on my toes. Miles was the storyteller, and a lot of credit goes to him for being able to pull all that together." Being the storyteller is a unique and somewhat difficult situation to be in, she says. It requires listening to students and synthesizing what they say into a story. "You use the voice of the child, but make it a unified story. You need to be in the headspace of the child, but also help them with proper grammar."

Nina observes that "it doesn't take long [for Miles] to connect with the child. He knows their names. He looks at them and listens. And if someone interrupts, he says, 'No I want to hear

what you're saying. Those are great ideas. Let's run with it.'" All agree that Miles' gift is that he is able to connect with children immediately. "It makes them happy and want to engage . . . It's just natural to him."

“[Miles] loves 826 in its most pure form. He just genuinely believes in everything that’s happening here. He’s always even-tempered and joyful and empathetic . . . It is heartwarming to me that we consistently can bring individuals like that into the space to mentor the students and serve as an adult role model for them.”

Miles asks students to talk about a day in the life of Spiderzilla. They debate about why spiders didn't take over the world, and one girl says there were too many other spiders. When Miles asks why, she says, "Spiderzilla's mother was always in the way." Miles responds, "You've created a family dynamic!" As these words are being typed on the page, Miles says he hopes Ms. Mildew will like the story. And as the group is brainstorming about a day in the life of Spiderzilla, they hear Ms. Mildew's creepy, craggy voice come over the intercom: "Excuse me! I just received the first page of your book, and I must say I'm intrigued! I want to hear more about Spiderzilla!" They look relieved. Miles assures her that the class is working very hard, and Ms. Mildew barks, "Get going! I need these books soon!" Miles placates her by saying, "We hear you, Ms. Mildew. We're all about to start on our endings," and the class spontaneously shouts, "We love you, Ms. Mildew!" to which she replies dismissively, "Yeah, yeah, yeah..."

Joshua Mandelbaum, the Executive Director of 826NYC, says, "Miles is excellent. That's the only way to put it." The center worked with over 250 volunteers last year, Joshua says, and Miles is particularly suited to leading field trips, as well as training other volunteers to lead them. "He's clearly a natural performer and he's great in front of the kids, and, even for the most dedicated volunteers, that's a really hard thing . . . To get up in front of the kids and perform, day in, day out and to train other volunteers to do that, that's very difficult . . . He has this level of enthusiasm. You just know that he loves 826 in its most pure form. He just genuinely believes in everything that's happening here. He's always even-tempered and joyful and empathetic. Those are just such admirable traits, and it is heartwarming to me that we consistently can bring individuals like that into the space to mentor the students and serve as an adult role model for them."



The students continue to weave the story:

“Spiderworld was a big red world floating through space, shaped like a big spider, made out of web—but it didn’t look red because it was covered in so many dark spiders. One day, Spiderzilla’s mother died from a bite from another spider. Spiderzilla felt sad and happy. It was very complicated. He started crying, but then laughing. He was alone in his web, which was in a tree.”

One very quiet student in the back raises his hands, and others ignore him. But Miles says, “Excuse me guys. Juan has a great idea. I want to hear him,” and they all get quiet and listen. Reflecting on this moment, Miles says, “They all have great ideas, and they’re excellent, imaginative kids, every single one of them. But I will always make room for a ‘Juan’ over here who has been quiet the whole time. It’s really important that you listen 100% to them and you make them feel a part of it, bring them in as soon as you can. Because it only takes one idea to bring a kid on board and then they’re on the boat sailing down to written story island. And the more you have kids invested in a story, the more they’re going to care about what they write and that is the best part of this stuff.”

“I’m going to make a sidekick to destroy the spider who killed my mother and help take over the world,” said Spiderzilla. Spiderzilla went to the store to get supplies to build his sidekick. He got pink eyes, some webs, things that spiders have recycled, TNT, ninja stars made of metal, and really sharp teeth with VENOM. Spiderzilla called his friend Jimmy-Bob-Spidertastic to help him carry everything home.”

Students continue to weave their ideas together, and in the final scene, Spiderzilla and Jimmy-Bob-Spidertastic conspire to take over the world. The story ends with a cliffhanger, which requires each student to find their own ending. As students disperse to complete their book with a personalized ending, Ms. Mildew pipes in again, sounding more upbeat. “So... I’ve just finished reading ALL of your books.” There is a long pause, as students all look at Miles hopefully. “Well,” she says slowly. “I wanted to tell you, after giving them a careful inspection, I have to say... I LOVED THEM! I’ve decided they’re ALL approved.” Without any prompting, students applaud! And Miles leads them in the final, “We love you, Ms. Mildew.” One girl comes up to Miles and says, “I think she really likes children, don’t you?” And Miles looks at her with a twinkle in his eyes.

At the end of the field trip, students happily file out of 826NYC with a customized book which includes their own ending, as well as their author bio and photo. “Miles brings out students’ creativity. It’s awesome,” their teacher comments. She plans to incorporate what they have learned from this two-hour intensive writing field trip into her curriculum.

Says Miles, “826 has really given me an opportunity to help kids, giving them something that they can walk out of here with and feel proud of, to create something that is really important. 826 is a great step for these kids.”

PROJECT CREDITS

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Arbor Consulting Partners was formed in 2002, and its senior social scientists have over twenty years of experience consulting to governments, businesses, universities, and foundations as well as to community-based organizations. They offer superior analytical expertise combined with a firm knowledge base in six principal areas: Community Development, Environment, Public Health, Human Resources, Early Care and Education, and Arts and Arts Education.

826NYC

826NYC’s writing center opened its doors in Park Slope in September 2004. In the 2014-15 school year, their programs offered over 2,400 students with opportunities to improve their writing and to work side-by-side with community volunteers. They also have a satellite tutoring center in Williamsburg, created in partnership with the Brooklyn Public Library, which has introduced their programs to an entirely new community of students.

826 National & The 826 National Network

826 National’s seven chapters (located in San Francisco, Ann Arbor/Detroit, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, New York City, and Washington, DC) offer a variety of inventive programs that provide under-resourced students, ages 6-18, with opportunities to explore their creativity and improve their writing skills. They also aim to help teachers get their classes excited about writing. Their mission is based on the understanding that great leaps in learning can happen with one-on-one attention, and that strong writing skills are fundamental to future success. The 826 National office serves the growing educational network by providing strategic leadership, administration, and other resources to ensure the success of the 826 network.

Cage Free Productions

Certified B Corporation, Cage Free Productions was born out of the mission to create impactful media that promotes social justice, human rights, and sustainability. They provide a unique and powerful service to individuals and organizations worldwide by developing powerful multimedia solutions that build trust.

826 National contracted Mindy Fried, Ph.D. from Arbor Consulting Partners, to compose the 826 National Network Stories. The goal of the series is to illuminate narratives of a few inspirational, key players across the 826 network who contribute to our mission in different ways.

