

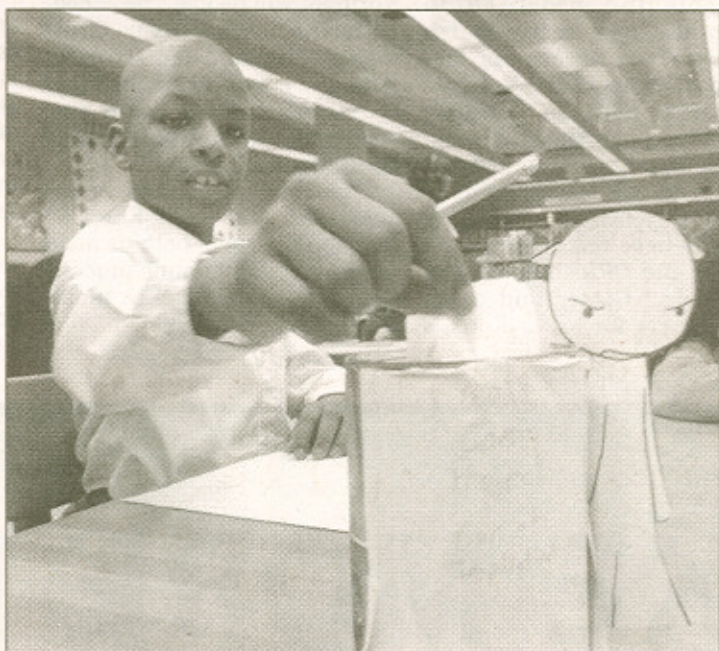


Jeff Holt/Register photos

Drawing on inspiration

ABOVE: 6-year-old Paige Brown, left, 11-year-old Shawn Morris, center, and 10-year-old Leo Weinreb, all of New Haven, work on their skills during a recent cartoon drawing class at the New Haven Free Public Library.

RIGHT: 10-year-old Alfie Barlow of New Haven takes a note of inspiration from the inspiration jar while working on his creation during the after-school class at the library.



Cartoons propel creative process

By Pamela McLoughlin
Register Staff

NEW HAVEN — One of the comic strips produced at New Haven's Public library on Wednesdays is centered on an incompetent excuse of a superhero named Moosey Moose and his safety-obsessed sidekick, Gosh, who sets out in search of replacement gear after his safety vest explodes.

In the most recent frames, Gosh finds the safety gear set of his dreams: It resists water, fire, lightning and even lava. At \$4 million it's too pricey, but Gosh begs, Moosey Moose relents, and they go broke.

What happens next can only come from the mind of the strip's author, Zenon Holowaty, 10, of Milford, who is part of the library's Create a Comic Project, held Wednesdays and led by Yale University graduate student John Baird.

The free program held in the children's library department between 5 p.m. and 6 p.m. is designed to stir creative thought and writing and most of all, for kids to have fun doing it.

"They don't even know they're learning," said Baird, a comic buff who designed the program.

Baird said when he got to Yale — where he is a graduate student in biostatistics and public health — he read about how there is a shortage of after-school programs for children. He had used comics for teaching English during an extended stay in Taiwan in summer 2005 and found he enjoyed teaching children. So he redesigned his program as a stand-alone after-school event, meaning kids can come one week or any other week.

Xia Feng, coordinator of children and youth services for the library, praised Baird as one of her best and most dedicated volunteers. The program typically draws 10-12 children per week.

"It's a big success. ...The parents are really excited about this program," Feng said. She said many libraries, including New Haven's are adding more comic books to their selection to entice more children to read.

Antoinette Brown, whose daughter, Paige, 6, attends, is one of the delighted parents. Although only 6, typically a bit young for the program, Paige is in second grade and reads and writes.

"She loves drawing and this is really helping her to broaden her imagination and creativity," Antoinette Brown said.

Baird, author of an Internet comic strip

called "Okashina Okashi" or "Strange Candy," has a casual style, but keeps the structure. He gives a short introduction, a few examples of how to come up with dialogue related to the picture and then, the fun begins.

The kids can write dialogue for strips already drawn; aside from Strange Candy, he regularly uses illustrations from Web comics "And Shine Heaven Now," and "Questionable Content." For kids like Zenon who also love to draw, he gives blank comic templates and they do both.

Just in case someone gets a creative block, there is what Baird calls the "Can of Inspiration" on the table, filled with slips of paper bearing words and phrases intended to spark thought, such as: "silly," "mean," "pessimistic," "Realizing it's the end of the world," "Do I look fat?" "Kneel before me," "Who are you?"

Baird hopes someday to write a book about the Create a Comic Project so others can bring it to children. He said the reason he uses Web comics as templates is because they are less familiar than popular strips such as Garfield, so kids feel less constrained in their style and story lines.

For more information, call 946-8129.