

Dan Rodricks: Children of the world need to see fewer guns, more puppets | COMMENTARY



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I offer a break today from everything awful - school shootings, urban crime, war, earthquake, illness, death, right-wing threats to American democracy- to tell you about a creative effort to enrich the lives of children. It's what the world needs.

During the first year of the pandemic, teachers across the land faced the toughest challenge of their careers: Teaching kids at a distance. Evan Margolis, a tutor in New York City, had it even tougher. All of his young students had difficulty learning. He worried that remote learning would mean no learning at all.

"When the pandemic hit," he says, "I took on a full slate of students, reading, math and writing. And the youngest students had a lot of trouble focusing over Zoom."

Margolis, a 32-year-old Pikesville native and University of Maryland grad, liked working with kids. He'd taken jobs in summer camps and theater programs. He'd worked as a nanny in Brooklyn, too.



Olivia Bernabe as Coral, Evan Margolis as himself, and Ines Nassara as Captain Totally Awesome

But his specialty was teaching children with dyslexia and other challenges. A reading specialist based in Howard County, Fran Bowman, had trained him and put him to work tutoring kids.

While his primary job was teaching, Margolis was also pursuing a career in film and television, but we'll get to that in a minute.

First, a little more on pandemic teaching. How did Margolis keep the attention of kids who posed a challenge under normal conditions?

Answer: Puppets.

Well, actually fruit.

Fruit puppets.

"I started making little puppets and doing characters, working the lessons into scenes," he says. "First, I just grabbed a lemon and Sharpied a face onto it, and the kids lit up. Then it was a lime, then a tennis ball." And a sock. He made a sock puppet, too.

"And it worked like a charm," he says. "I had 4- and 5-year-olds glued to the screen, ready to learn every day."

Now, it should be noted that this talk of "puppets" and "doing characters" and "scenes" fits the Evan Margolis profile. His background is theatrical. He was in plays and musicals while a student at Beth Tfiloh Dahan Community School. At College Park, in the university's Individual Studies Program, Margolis created his own major - character studies and design, following in the footsteps of another Maryland graduate, the late Jim Henson, creator of the Muppets. In 2009, while home from college, Margolis helped establish a community theater in Pikesville, the Beth Tfiloh Community Theater, that's still operating. (They're staging the musical "Newsies" in August.)

So, you get the idea - a creative, theatrical ambition on top of a practical career in teaching kids, especially those who have difficulty learning.

The puppet success during the pandemic took Margolis back to an idea that had been developing in his noodle. "I was teaching during the day and writing and working in entertainment whenever I had the chance, mostly in independent circles," he says. "I met some really wonderful, passionate and driven artists who would work on each other's projects and support one another in our pursuits."

One of them was an independent TV producer named Lauren Flack. She and Margolis tossed around the idea of creating a new show for children, and her interest in the project intensified after she watched the excellent documentary, "Won't You Be My Neighbor?," about children's TV pioneer Fred Rogers.

Margolis' effective use of puppets would be a big part of the show. He and Flack recruited Betsy Rosen, another Baltimore native and Maryland alum, to be puppet director. Margolis' brother, Josh, stepped in as creative producer. Brandon Steiner and Olivia Bernabe served as co-producers.

They developed a talk show for kids in the 4-to-8 age group, with Evan Margolis as host and actors playing amusing characters, and with learning built into each episode.

"We shot it in a studio in Brooklyn in two days," Margolis says.

The show is called, "The Smack-Dab In the Middle of the Day Show," and it launched last week on the Kartoon Channel!, a streaming platform of Genius Brands International, a children's media company.

The first episode of "Smack-Dab" includes an amusing lesson in fractions and introduces Coral, the purple puppet, and Captain Totally Awesome (Ines Nassara). Awesome teaches Coral how to fight off stress, worry and anxiety with an original song, "Calm, Cool and Confident." That's a big part of the "Smack-Dab" offering, a creative take on what educators call social-emotional learning (SEL).

"So many kids missed out on essential formative social experiences due to the pandemic," says Margolis. "A 4-year-old at this point has lived a significant amount of life in quarantine, or being protected in some way from significant social experiences."

Margolis consulted with a pediatric psychologist, Melanie Franklin, of Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, to identify the most pressing, pandemic-related needs of kids, then address them on the show.

"The show dives deep into topics like anxiety management, self-confidence, common fears like doctors or the dark, and it provides practical and fun ways for [kids] to integrate these SEL skills," Margolis says. "My goal for the show, which is the same goal I have for each one of my teaching sessions, is that every kid should feel a little better about themselves and the world after watching an episode."

I'm a little older than the show's target audience, but it certainly had that effect on me.