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A Local Comic Book Artist's Counter Culture

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Norwood artist Ivan Velez, Jr. often worries about the future of comic books.

A born and bred Bronxite of Puerto Rican descent, Velez has risen to what some might consider great heights in the industry he frets over.

He's worked with the biggest brands in the business, DC and Marvel, created a short film, an award-winning miniseries, and had his writing from the Ghost Rider comic translated to the big screen.

But Velez, who recently spoke and exhibited some of his work at the Bronx Academy of Arts and Dance (BAAD) with other local lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) artists, says he lives gig-to-gig and feels as if he still has to prove himself.

"I always feel like I have to keep trying out for work and there's only like two Latinos in the industry that were ever in comics," he says, adding half-jokingly: "Doesn't that give me a little street credit?"

He says this feeling reflects the reality of a narrow-minded industry that he is actively working to change.

In high school, Velez says he was "kinda fat and homely." While most teens were busy making friends or partying, Velez spent most of his time drawing. After college, Velez began writing and giving voice to his characters, while struggling to find an outlet to talk about homosexuality during a time, the 1980s, when HIV and AIDS were ravaging the gay community.

"A lot of people around me were getting sick during that time and many friends and family were dying from AIDS," he says.

In the mid-'80s he wrote his first successful series, "Tales of the Closet," about a group of teenagers from Queens battling with their sexuality and society's repercussions. The books earned him several awards and were used at the time by Bronx high schools (part of a short-lived multicultural initiative) to personalize LGBT issues for teens.

Since then, the industry has seen little progress in terms of LGBT and Latino representation, Velez says. Main characters remain mostly muscular white males and busty blondes, he says.

The industry has changed in other ways, Velez says, but not for the better.

“Kids used to get a lot of their morals from comics,” says Velez, who thinks comic creators have begun to choose violence over depth to turn a buck. “Nowadays producers only want something that is marketable, something they can turn into a movie.”

With sales falling over the last decade and videogame popularity skyrocketing, it’s no surprise illustrators feel the need to fit a certain formula. But they shouldn’t have to, Velez says.

On a recent trip to Japan, Velez says everyone was reading comics, widely known as “manga.” Velez says manga themes stretch across boundaries of age, sex, and creed. “They are braver in their writing,” Velez says. “They aren’t afraid to talk about things like sex.”

These days Velez, who says he’s in his 40s, can be found at Bronx libraries teaching “Comic Culture,” a free design workshop for kids. He wants to transform the climate of comic writing from the ground up. “You don’t change things unless you change the culture,” he says.

Comics should teach us to keep an open mind, Velez says. “I always tell kids to look at images to see what they really mean, how they talk to you and what they want you to think, and then I say, ‘Take that and go think for yourself.’”

Ed. Note: *Velez’s 10-series comic, “Tales of the Closet,” was recently featured as the first American comic in Manga’s Netcomics. He is now working on a series called “Dead High Yearbook” and in his free time, finishing up his first novel, “Opaline’s Secret.”*