



Children's Museum of Manhattan

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### Chris Rock and CMOM host celebration for early education program

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It was the 12th day of December, a Friday evening, and the 13th day before Christmas. Outside the cold, gusty night wind raced past the Children's Museum of Manhattan (CMOM) at 212 West 83rd Street in New York City. Inside, the delighted squeal of children's laughter rocked the colorful PlayWorks exhibition room with caressing warmth that encompassed CMOM. Suddenly, it became quiet as 20 excited children from the East Side Settlement House in the South Bronx, gathered around comedian Chris Rock. Soon they are transported to a fantasyland of pink (cupcakes, cotton candy, princess dresses), as Rock reads them one of his favorite children's books, "Pinkalicious" by Victoria Kann and Elizabeth Kann.

Seated on the thick, gray carpet of CMOM's, the children, many of whom are 5 years old and younger, listened attentively, their innocent, round eyes glued on the multitalented Rock, who in addition to being a comedian, is also an actor, screenwriter, director, film and television producer.

At times, the children's gaze shifted to take in the colorful artwork in the book illustrated by Victoria Kann, which Rock showed them. At other times, it was to look around "the innovative research-based early childhood learning environment, keyed to all of the skills young children need for school."

Hosted by Rock and CMOM, the special gathering was a celebration for the preschoolers, who are participants in the CMOM's Bronx-based early education program and its partner, the East Side Settlement House, a neighborhood resource center. Located in the South Bronx, one of the most disadvantaged urban communities in the U.S., East Side Settlement House "believes education is the key that enables all people to



Andrew Ackerman, the executive director of CMOM

create economic and civic opportunities for themselves, their families and their community."

The three-year collaboration between CMOM and East Side Settlement House offers a weekly series of interactive programs designed for both children and parents, which include math, language arts, storytelling, art and music. In addition, the program "helps children develop a greater interest in books, increase their vocabulary, learn to read and listen for

meaning in a story, as well as develop self confidence as they express themselves through art and music."

"All of New York's children deserve the opportunity to have access to programs that help prepare them to enter school and set the foundation for a lifetime of learning. This program places emphasis on learning within the family, where the greatest impacts and results will be realized. The children involved in this program are some of the most at-risk youngsters who desperately need this assistance," said Andrew Ackerman, the executive director of CMOM. "We could not do this work without the guidance and assistance of East Side Settlement House, and we are honored that a superstar like Chris Rock is highlighting our efforts."

"All the children who take part in the Museum of Manhattan's early childhood education program and their parents and caregivers must be commended for their hard work and commitment to starting the education process early," said Rock. "CMOM is a vital New York resource that knows children and addresses the critical needs of disadvantaged families better than anyone, and I am thrilled to be helping them celebrate these children."

Rock, the father of two daughters, ages 6 and 4, initially spoke succinctly in sharing his reasons for being supportive



Comedian Chris Rock and Vernell Reed, director, Early Childhood, at East Side House Settlement, surrounded by children of the East Side Settlement House

of CMOM's initiatives, as well as the importance of literacy for children: "You really try to get as much stuff in as you can...it's little kids...the Bronx...read to them...It's such a little thing to do."

Warming up to the subject, he continued: "What I just did with these kids..." he added, pausing to ask, "What time is it now?" Looking at his watch, he continued: "I'll be doing this with my own kids in an hour." He laughed, and then deadpanned: "I'll be reading the same book to my kids. The same one!" he repeated, feigning irritation. "I'm so used to reading that book," he said with a slight chuckle, before cleverly going over this dialogue in his head (perhaps to later use for a segment of his popular TV series, "Everybody Hates Chris").

"It's weird, you know, my kids have probably a couple hundred books in their room, but you know, they still like four books." Seeing the absurdity of the situation, the natural comedian in him came out, as he pantomimed: "It's like, this

one again? You're sure? We got all these other books."

Getting serious again, Rock commended CMOM for its inventive space and for its overall intelligent programs and activities by saying: "It's just not an indoor playground. It's a lot of learning games. It has a nice atmosphere...It's great. It all helps," he explained before adding his own personal testimony. "My kids go here all the time. They know this is a good hang."

In closing, Rock, who was voted by Comedy Central as the fifth greatest stand-up comedian of all time, wished everyone a Merry Christmas and a Happy Kwanza, then added a closing message to parents: "Just try and tell these kids that life isn't about things...life ain't things," he repeated, using the vernacular to emphasize his point. "Life is about your relationship with the people that love you."

(Be sure to read Chris Rock's exclusive interview with Misani in the January, 1, 2009, New Year's issue.)