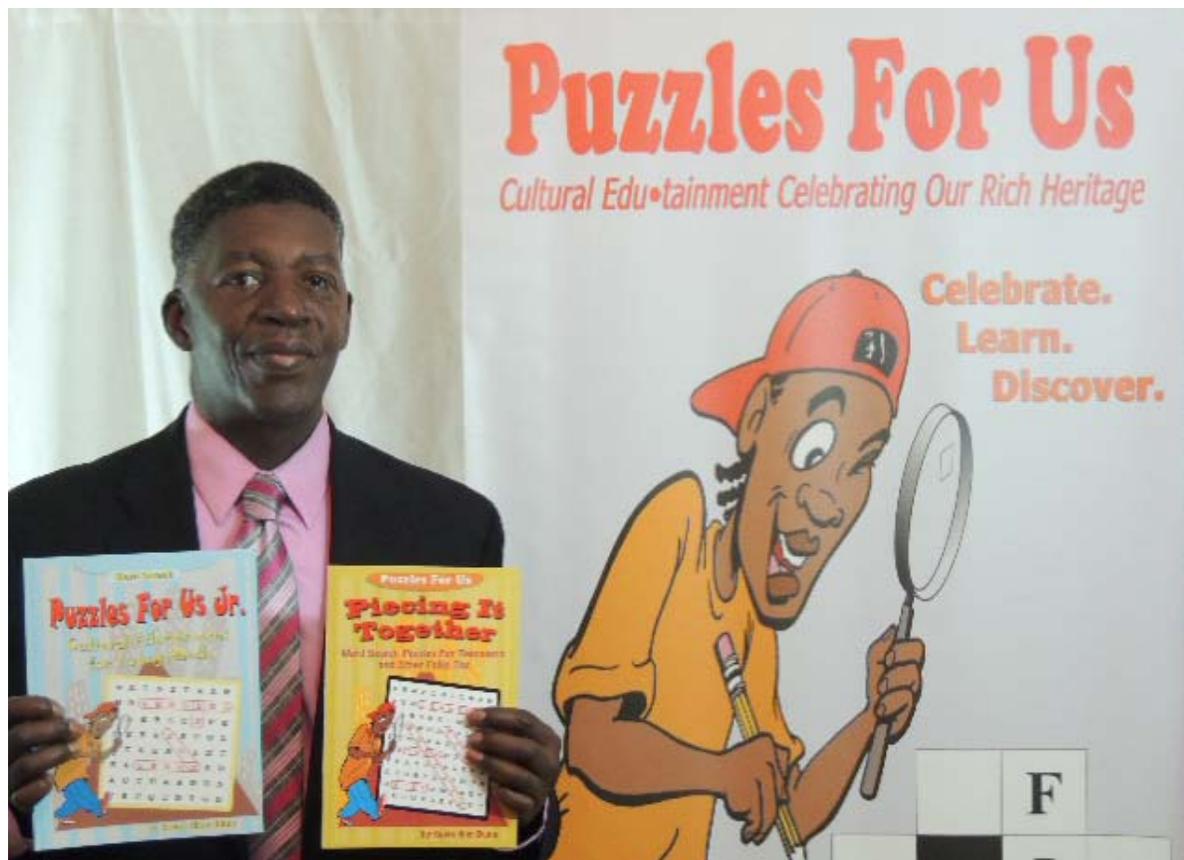


Puzzler changes education one crossword at a time

[Courtenav Brown](#) | 8/15/2013, 9:45 a.m. | Updated on 8/15/2013, 9:45 a.m.



Kevin Dunn (S. Black photo)

For Kevin Dunn, the answer to keeping Black youth out of trouble and informed about their past, present and future is puzzling. Word puzzling, that is.

Dunn, known as the “Puzzle Guy” or “Mr. Puzzles,” published his first book of puzzles, “Puzzles for Us,” in 2005. It was distributed in schools across the country and is far from frivolous. The puzzles accompany short essays that cover heavy topics, including how teenagers should respond to stop-and-frisk and racial profiling, and they incorporate important figures in Black history. According to Dunn, the key to the puzzles’ success for youth is that they are both educational and entertaining, what Dunn terms as “edutaining.”

“[Kids] are doing the puzzle and they are learning,” he said. “There’s a lot of history in it, but it’s subtle.”

Dunn got the idea to sell the puzzles he made in his spare time after his sister convinced him to make copies of the crossword puzzles and bind them together into a booklet. For about a year, he peddled his makeshift puzzle books from a tiny table on Fulton Street in downtown Brooklyn.

“I actually sold a couple of them,” Dunn said. “People liked the idea.”

What started as a hobby in the 1990s while he was a full-time data programmer for the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) became a chance for a big business after he was downsized from his position at the ACLU. He became involved with Project Enterprise, a micro-lending organization that helps entrepreneurs receive funding, which helped him publish his first book of puzzles that focused on African history and Black icons like Marcus Garvey.

Dunn has since been certified by the New York City Department of Education as a contracted vendor, which means he is able to offer his “edutainment” puzzle books as library and reference materials to more than 1,000 schools across the city. He has also created custom puzzles for the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in commemoration of the 150th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, as well as custom word search puzzles for the Apollo Theater.

Aside from selling his books, Dunn, a father of three and a grandfather, also hosts workshops at high schools in New York, New Jersey and Philadelphia, where he uses his puzzles and his personal experiences as launching points for discussions about the challenges children of color face.

“I tell them that I didn’t just end up as the ‘Puzzle Guy.’ I had my bumps and bruises too,” Dunn said.

Raised in Brooklyn, Dunn admits that he did not have the “traditional” childhood for someone in his profession. While he said that he was “one of the smart kids” who always enjoyed Black history and rearranging words, he stopped going to school and started hanging out on the streets. By the time he entered the 10th grade, his grades were poor, and he dropped out of school. He was eventually jailed for six years, during which time he received his GED and tutored other inmates.

But Dunn said that these experiences help the teenagers in his workshops believe in his work.

“That’s why when I go into the school and work with youngsters, I say, ‘Look, your story is my story. There’s nothing that you can do that I haven’t done. Get kicked out of class? Been there, done that. Get locked up? Been there, done that,’” Dunn said.

Dunn hopes that his more advanced series of puzzle books for high-schoolers, which cover self-esteem, bullying and juvenile injustice, will help improve the school systems in New York City—especially after the recent announcement of what Dunn called the “disappointing” standardized test scores that were released by the Department of Education last week. Only 46 percent of African-Americans in New York City did well on the tests.

“Under Bloomberg, it’s about taking a test and passing a test,” Dunn said. “Real learning isn’t taking place; they are just teaching to the test.

“What my puzzles do is provide more meaningful content and a more engaging environment for students because there are stories about them and reflects them in a positive way,” he added.

While there are several schools across the boroughs that have already incorporated “Puzzles for Us” into their curriculum, Dunn said that he has received some backlash about his books.

“Some are not really comfortable with the idea of puzzles ‘about us,’” he said. “But a lot of the textbooks don’t tell our story in an accurate way. I tell folks that these are the missing pieces, the stuff you don’t really get to hear about.”

Dunn will continue to help others put the pieces together with the kickoff of the “Meet Mr. Puzzles” national book tour, which is set to kick off this September. The proceeds will go toward education programs in urban areas that are currently facing financial challenges. He is also developing a “What I See is What I Can Be” coloring book that will feature illustrations of famous African-Americans like tennis stars Venus and Serena Williams and music legend Bob Marley to inspire children at a young age. Also in the works is a puzzle that Dunn hopes will help educate people about the history of Harlem, which he said is “disappearing fast.”

“Because of gentrification, the landscape of Harlem is changing,” Dunn said. “This is a way of preserving the history. The book would be a snapshot of Harlem as it exists now, for the historical record.”

For more on Kevin Dunn and the Puzzles For Us cultural “edutainment” series, visit www.puzzlesforus.com or call 718-538-6102.