

## DNAinfo.com New York neighborhood news

CLAREMONT VILLAGE — As they screwed shelves together and hung art on the wall, the assorted artists in the raw storefront off Southern Boulevard looked like any other new tenants Tuesday — until a drum beat dropped and the freestyle rhyming began.

“We got a new space!” rapped Rebel Diaz Arts Collective co-founder, Rodrigo Venegas, known as RodStarz.

Two months ago, the group was evicted from the Mott Haven loft it had transformed from an abandoned industrial space into a thriving hip-hop-themed community center.

Now, the group has found a transitional home in the Bronx Music Heritage Center Lab, a storefront at 1303 Louis Niñé Blvd. inside an affordable-housing complex, where its members will host classes and shows through August.

“This is a victory for hip-hop,” RodStarz said during Tuesday’s announcement of the group’s four-month residency. “You couldn’t hold us down for long.”

The roughly 20-member collective operated out of its previous space inside a former factory near the Bruckner Expressway for several years. There, members organized media-making workshops for young people, a monthly open mic night and a new “radical library.”

But the group’s landlord evicted it on Feb. 28, citing unpaid rent, unauthorized graffiti and neighbors’ complaints — claims the group disputes.

After the eviction — which cost the group about \$30,000 in confiscated equipment and furniture, RodStarz estimated — the collective applied for the residency and was selected.

“They fit the ethos of what we’re trying to do here,” said Bobby Sanabria, a Grammy-nominated musician and BMCH Music Advisory Board member.



Photo credit: Patrick Wall/DNAInfo.com

*Members of the Rebel Diaz Arts Collective (rear) perform with the musician Bobby Sanabria inside the collective's temporary new home at the Bronx Music Heritage Center Lab.*



*Photo credit: Patrick Wall/DNAInfo.com*

*RodStarz (at microphone) with other members of the Rebel Diaz Arts Collective on the stage inside their new space at the Bronx Music Heritage Center Lab.*

“Hip-hop is a tool across the world for people to get their voices heard when they’ve been oppressed,” Sanabria added. “And they’re at the forefront of that.”

The collective plans to continue much of its past programming in its new temporary space.

This will include the first-Friday open mic night, a biweekly reading group and workshops on hip-hop dancing, rap-lyric writing, music production and photography.

There will also be open hours when anyone can access the collective’s computers or peruse its hundreds of books and records.

“We are going to try to feed the hunger for knowledge,” said collective member Claudia De la Cruz.

The residency program, which offers artists the 1,400-square-foot storefront space, a monthly stipend and technical support, began last year with the rap duo, Circa ‘95.

Eventually, it will relocate to BMHC’s permanent home inside a planned 10-story, mixed-used development to be called Bronx Commons. Construction of that development is slated to begin next year, according to BMHC’s parent organization, the nonprofit WHEDco.

Meanwhile, the Rebel Diaz Arts Collective is searching for a permanent space of its own and collecting online donations.

While trying, the experience has also been galvanizing, RodStarz said.

“Our collective is stronger than ever,” he explained, “because we’ve been through adversity.”