



*Brian Conley and Lia Meirelles sit down for a chat with Mark Gessner, in green, and Jeremy Redleaf at the Talk Shop on Monday.*

By V.L. HENDRICKSON

Jeremy Redleaf has been talking to strangers his entire life. And now he's inviting all New Yorkers to sit down for a chat. As an added incentive, he's offering free cupcakes.

Mr. Redleaf, 28 years old, opened the Talk Shop, what he called the first-ever conversation salon, on West 37th Street on Monday. The idea is simple: Anyone can sit down and start talking.

"A conversation that starts with—'What are your three desert island foods?'—can end up to be about nutrition," said Mr. Redleaf, who is the voice of Gonnigan on "Sesame Street" and also runs the website Odd Job Nation. "Something small can lead to something big."

Topics come from spinning a conversation wheel, but not everyone needs to do so. The Talk Shop's first visitor was a 55-year-old engineer named Willie. "He was ready to go; all I had to do was lean back and listen," Mr. Redleaf said. Another guest, Ari Rubin, 29, wasn't shy, either. He ended up talking mostly about a common topic: women and dating. (Apparently, it's a lot easier to date in New York than it is in Los Angeles.)



The Talk Shop charges nothing and will be open through April 13 at the West 37th Street space, which was brokered through Chashama, an organization that connects arts groups with underutilized real estate in the city. Passersby can see into the salon, and can watch Mr. Redleaf and his team of “shop talkers”—people including comedians, drag queens, authors and a life coach who help keep the conversations going—as they talk to whomever comes in.

To make the Talk Shop inviting, Mr. Redleaf set up a beach umbrella and chairs, hung a string of lights and painted the walls lemon yellow. If the “free cupcakes” sign isn’t enough to attract a crowd, the interactive window will help. When you touch a hand-shaped reactor on the glass, a screen brings up messages that strangers from around the world

have submitted on the Talk Shop website.

The idea for the Talk Shop came to Mr. Redleaf in the days and weeks after superstorm Sandy, when his Murray Hill neighbors suddenly starting talking to him—and each other. “It briefly turned into a community,” he said. “It gave people something to talk about.” Mr. Redleaf wanted to find a way to make “the Big Apple feel smaller when there wasn’t a disaster.”

Mark Gessner, a 32-year-old actor who is acting as a shop talker, said: “It’s not every day you find something that’s never been done in New York City before.” He said he was also interested in the idea of sitting down New Yorkers to talk. In the city, people are always physically close, but not engaged with each other, “like golf balls rolling around in a bucket,” he said. The salon gives people a chance to be heard, he added.

Tania Luna, another shop talker and a self-described surprisologist, said people sometimes need help finding “the pot of gold on the other side of awkward.”

Ms. Luna, who teaches psychology at Hunter College and is CEO of Surprise Industries, a company that helps people “thrive in the unknown,” is working on a book on the psychology of surprise.

She says most people “want to connect, want to let go, but we won’t let ourselves...and when we hold back, we don’t have the experience we want to have.”

Both she and Mr. Redleaf said they think everyone really wants to talk to each other and that some of the best New York City moments happen when strangers interact without any real reason to do so. So Ms. Luna has some tricks up her sleeve—none of which she would reveal—to help people embrace the surprise.

Brian Conley, 30, and Lia Meirelles, 22, were strangers before they met at the Talk Shop. Both are visitors (Mr. Conley is in town from Chicago; Ms. Meirelles from Rio de Janeiro) and they sat down to talk to Messrs. Redleaf and Gessner about their weird habits and perceptions of New York.

“One of my misconceptions was that New Yorkers aren’t friendly,” Mr. Conley said. “In the Midwest, people always say New York isn’t a friendly place, but today I found that wasn’t true.”

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