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Marvel's editor-in-chief takes risk with Latino superhero team

NEW YORK -- Like many who become superheroes, Nestor Rodriguez's transformation is rooted in loss: His father, a civil rights activist and New York City councilman, is murdered in front of him.

Yet unlike other superheroes who gain their powers through the bite of a radioactive spider or through birth on an alien planet, Rodriguez is changed through an Afro-Caribbean religious ceremony.

The unusual twist is thanks to Marvel Entertainment Inc. editor-in-chief Joe Quesada, who in his seven-year tenure has shown an ability to push forward comic book tradition by encouraging controversial changes to characters and taking risks on portraying diversity.

"One of the things I don't do here is publish in fear," Quesada said recently, sitting at his desk at Marvel's midtown Manhattan headquarters, a day after attending the red-carpet premiere of the Spider-Man 3 movie.

Under his stewardship of Marvel's marquee characters, Captain America was assassinated, Spider-Man's identity was revealed and Rawhide Kid came out of the closet.

And then there is Eleggua, the character that Rodriguez becomes. Quesada says Eleggua and the team he leads, the Santerians, are the first all-Latino comic book team whose powers are derived from the Afro-Caribbean religion of santeria.

His drawings and sketches of the team from their cameo appearance in "Daredevil:Father" are currently the subject of an exhibit at the Franklin H. Williams Caribbean Cultural Center African Diaspora Institute in Manhattan through July. He said he would return to the Santerians' story in its own series as early as next year.

Quesada writes of the Santerians in a statement for the exhibit that he hoped they would reflect "a more modern and accurate representation of the contributions Latinos from across the spectrum are making in our world today."

The idea of representing diversity has had a contentious history in comics. "Superhero fans are very conservative in their likes and dislikes," said Matt Brady, editor-in-chief of Newsarama.com, a popular comic book Web site. He said attempts to bring greater diversity to comics have often been met with skepticism.

When the modern-day superhero comic book was invented in the 1930s, the characters were white, reflecting the ethnicity of their creators.

By the early 1970s, comics were reacting to the civil rights movements and other changes in society by introducing characters more reflective of a pluralistic society. For instance, Marvel comics introduced Hector Ayala as the White Tiger and T'Challa, the heir to an African dynasty, as the Black Panther.

Still, characters of color have rarely anchored their own titles. In 2004, Marvel created its first comic featuring a Latina superhero, Anya Corazon, a Brooklyn teen with powers similar to Spider-Man. Her series only lasted a handful of issues.

Referring to Anya's series, Gerry Gladston, co-owner of Midtown Comics in Manhattan, said that comic fans didn't seem to take to the stories or art. "The people did not latch onto it. I do believe demand is there, though."

DC Comics, Marvel's main rival, has also featured its share of superheroes of color, notably one version of the Blue Beetle, a Latino teen who lives in El Paso.

Axel Alonso, Marvel's executive editor (the "consigliere" to Quesada's "don," as he describes it), said it is a struggle to balance the push for greater diversity in the comic universe with reader expectation. He pointed to Black Panther, which was re-launched in 2005 and called a success.

"I'm Latino. So is Joe," he said, referring to Quesada, who is the son of Cuban immigrants. "We're obviously interested in having Latino characters in projects."

But he said that such characters have to arise organically. "Joe's story in the Santerians works because the characters are rooted in his past," he said.

For the Santerians and the "Daredevil:Father" comic where they first appeared, Quesada drew on his own experiences. The story came to him as he sat at his father's bedside in a Miami hospital in 2003, reminiscing about his relationship with his father and his mother's practice of santeria.

Quesada, whose father passed away shortly after he came up with the idea for the story, said he thinks his dad would have liked the comic.

"I think he would have dug it," he said. "I think he would have been proud."