
Cyrus Moulton
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Worcester — There’s a new comic book superhero in town and her mission is combating COVID-19 through education...and coloring.

“We really wanted a way to explain the mRNA vaccine for COVID in a fun, educational way that was scientifically accurate for kids and parents and to take the fear out of questions about what is the vaccine, how does it work, etc.,” said Angela Messmer-Blust, who's a senior scientific adviser at the RNA Therapeutics Institute at UMass Chan Medical School and scientific adviser on the comic and coloring book, “Emma RNA vs. Spike Man.”
“Hopefully, we can take some fear out of what is in the vaccine and how it works,” she added.

The comic/coloring book, written and illustrated by Erin Kim, follows the heroine Emma RNA, who represents the mRNA COVID-19 vaccine, and her cohorts Auntie Body (say it aloud to understand what it depicts) and Mr. T (as in the T/white blood cell of the immune system) as they combat Spike Man (COVID-19).

Using the superhero format — Messmer-Blust said her daughter’s fascination with Wonder Woman contributed much to the project — the book takes COVID quite literally from the universal level to the cellular level, as Spike Man and his minions are unleashed upon the world and infect an unwitting victim.

“It’s more accessible to kids when you see a struggle and good wins out in the end, especially during COVID when we haven’t been able to see our friends and things have been hard,” Messmer-Blust said. “And I wanted a little light at the end of the tunnel, also.”

Meanwhile, “Science Breaks” interject the narrative to explain scientific terms and information in an accessible and scientifically accurate manner — for instance, describing cells as factories, DNA as an instruction manual and more.

“We had to be very careful in what we chose to explain, and how to do this in manageable chunks,” Mary Pickering, director of public engagement with science with RNA Therapeutics Institute and science editor of the project, said.

Messmer-Blust agreed.

“As scientists we tend to think at a very molecular level and can get very ‘in the weeds,’” Messmer-Blust said. “We have to learn to zoom out and give a bigger picture of what’s happening.”
Kim, a senior at Wellesley College who collaborated on the book while an intern, said the project combined her interests in education, biology and immunology, and digital graphics.

"Effective science communication and education are important to me and something our society needs more of," Kim, who is studying biochemistry, said. "I knew that local students, including underrepresented minorities and those with little science exposure, would receive the coloring book. So, this project was an opportunity to make science more accessible and fun and to educate the community about mRNA vaccines, which we know are a crucial way to address the COVID-19 pandemic."

The book is available to download online, and hard copies are being distributed throughout Worcester and Boston public schools.

After sharing the project on social media, requests for the book have come in from California, Italy, India and Australia, the collaborators said. A Spanish-language version was recently completed, and the collaborators said they plan to translate it into Portuguese and other languages.

“The sky’s the limit for how many people we can get to download it,” Messmer-Blust said.

And although written for children between 5 and 11 who are now eligible for the vaccine, the book — like all good children’s books — also has its adult audience in mind.

“(We hope) that people are open to learn the science of it and make the decision that will be best for their health and their kids’ health, so hopefully this will help them understand it better,” Messmer-Blust said.

In fact, she said a vaccine-hesitant member of her family has requested a copy.

“To me, that was the biggest win of the whole coloring book,” Messmer-Blust said.