

Features

Finding their voice: Creative writing programs provide much needed outlet for Detroit youth

AARON MONDRY | MONDAY, FEBRUARY 13, 2017

Teaching artist Peter Markus at in a classroom at Marcus Garvey Academy



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Peter Markus has a number of moving stories from his 20 years of teaching poetry in Detroit schools through the [InsideOut](#) (iO) literary arts program. But perhaps his favorite is from a second-grade class he facilitated at Golightly Education Center when a boy got up in front of the class to share what he had written. After each reading, the class would count to three, then clap once in unison, sending a "tsunami of energy" to each poet.

Afterwards, the class's teacher followed Markus into the hallway and said, with tears in her eyes, that the second-grader had a severe stutter and hardly ever spoke. Yet that day, he stood up and read with perfect fluidity.

"That boy found his voice through the page," says Markus.

With the Detroit school system [requiring a massive bailout](#) last year and [38 potential school closings](#) caused by academics this year, budgets are tighter than ever. Arts are often one of the

first line items cut. That's where creative writing programs have stepped in to provide that programming, both in and out of the classroom.

Creative writing imparts a number of benefits on young minds. On an obvious level, it improves students' writing. But its benefits have been proven to extend to other subjects, even those where writing is not a primary component.



Teaching artist Peter Markus in a classroom at Marcus Garvey Academy

"When young people have a positive experience during the school day, it impacts the rest of their time in school in a profound way," says Suma Rosen, executive director of iO. "It leaks into other academic areas. It shifts their frame of mind to being in school as a learner."

The creative writing classroom also provides students a chance to let their imagination roam free. It's a respite from the drudgery and stress that can accumulate in the life of a Detroit student.

"It's sometimes the one moment in their day where someone says, 'What if ... ?'" says Markus. "We help open that window to see whatever you want to see and say whatever you want to say within the boundaries of appropriate language in school."

iO has teaching artists in 26 elementary, middle, and high schools this school year, and has worked with over 50,000 students since its inception in 1995.

Engaged parents can also send their child to an after-school writing program. The 826 brand,

which started out of a commercial space in San Francisco, has since expanded to seven chapters across the country. That includes [826michigan](#), which has operated out of a "Robot Supply and Repair Shop"—each chapter has its own whimsical theme—in Ann Arbor since 2005. 826 chapters have these fanciful storefronts in part to sell books and toys to supplement revenue. But more essentially, it gets youth excited about learning—not always an easy task.



Amanda Uhle, executive director of 826michigan

"We want young people to feel really good about coming here, to a place that's different, that values things that are new, exciting, creative," says Amanda Uhle, executive director of 826michigan. "We aim to have fun. If we're not experiencing joy in what we're doing, we're not up to the right things."

Now Detroit will have its own Robot shop. The first after-school tutoring session was held last Tuesday, Feb. 8 out of its Eastern Market location. 826michigan offers one-on-one tutoring four days a week at its Ann Arbor location and, initially, twice a week in Detroit.

While tutors can help students in any subject, the center's main emphasis is on creative writing. In addition to the after-school tutoring, 826 offers a number of writing workshops that build specific skills, offer constructive feedback, or simply provide a judgment-free space for writing.



Store of 826michigan's Detroit location

826 engages directly with local schools as well. Its in-school program helps teachers with classroom writing projects, from one day workshops to multiple visits to support larger projects, like creating a book of student work. It also opens its doors a couple of times a week for school field trips where facilitators create an original story with the students.

All of 826's services are free of charge because all of its tutors are trained volunteers—500 over the last decade in Michigan, to be exact, who have logged over 17,000 hours.

Uhle credits 826's effectiveness to its volunteers, which allows them to drastically reduce the typical teacher to student classroom ratio.

"Teachers are stretched for resources, funds, and time," she says. "We've got four tutors in the room, which means that much more time a student has with adult. What you would see is our adults kneeling next to the desk of a student.

"One-to-one attention may be rare in the ordinary lives of these kids. And we think every person benefits from a little extra attention, a little focus on them and what their unique challenges are."

iO facilitates their own after-school writing program for teenagers called [Citywide Poets](#). Held weekly at six locations throughout the city, Citywide Poets offers youth more than a place to write, but also the opportunity to be part of an artistic community. Students workshop each other's writing, and adult writers help young writers find opportunities to publish and perform.

Hajjar Baban's school in Dearborn didn't have a creative writing program. But she learned that non-Detroit students could still attend the Citywide Poets meeting at the Detroit Public Library. And attend she did—nearly every week for two years.

She credits the program with making her the person she is today. "It definitely boosted my self-esteem," says Baban. "I used to give disclaimers when performing like, 'This poem is really bad.' I'm very introverted, but for those few moments I can speak to other people through my art."

Another way these programs increase student confidence is by showcase their work in print—both 826michigan and iO publish their students' work. iO actually publishes a book of poems for every class they facilitate with individual covers and titles, and print upwards of 250 copies for the school and kids. "That does set us apart from every other program," says Markus. "Most are saner than we are."



Student and tutors at the first day of tutoring at 826's Eastern Market location

There's also a number of other, smaller organizations that help fill in the gaps in creative writing programming. One such organization is the [Detroit Poetry Society](#) (DPS), a collection of eight anchor members, or storytellers.

"It's the idea of processing and figuring out my life and making it into a story I can understand, and hopefully someone else can relate to," says DPS co-founder Gabrielle Knox. "Poetry is a writing style. But stories are universal."

In addition to making art and participating in open-mics, members of DPS do much of the same work as their better-funded peers, just on a smaller scale and in a less-formal way, by facilitating workshops in and out of schools for youth. Knox and others are also bootstrapping a renovation of a house in the North End as a community space and headquarters. This will not only expand their programming, but provide occasional food and shelter for low-income artists.

"There's other needs, like having a home, basic things for survival required to free up space for creativity," says Knox. "That's what the community needs, and we reflect the community."

Artistic community is what propelled Baban to where she is now. A freshman at the University of Wisconsin, she received a four-year scholarship in the [First Wave Hip Hop and Urban Arts Learning Community](#), where students "study and create together in a close-knit, dynamic campus community."

"I'm currently at Wisconsin because of InsideOut," says Baban. She's also on the path to being a professional poet.

This article is part of Michigan Nightlight, a series of stories about the programs and people that positively impact the lives of Michigan kids. It is made possible with funding from the [W.K. Kellogg Foundation](#). Read more in the series [here](#).

All photos by [Nick Hagen](#).