

826 Michigan helps students succeed

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(826michigan volunteer Kati Shanks tutors a student in the organization's Ann Arbor writing lab)

By Patrick Keating
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

The Ann Arbor-based 826michigan, which helps students with creative writing and other endeavors, recently began working in three Detroit schools.

According to Executive Director Amanda Uhle, the 8-year-old organization has served mostly Ypsilanti students as well as some from both Ann Arbor and Detroit.

"Then we started in February in earnest to serve Detroit students," she said.

This past school year, 826michigan has been working with University Prep Academy, Amelia Earhart Elementary School and Bunche Elementary School. Uhle said they hope to return to those schools in the fall, but 826michigan is offering programs in the community over the summer.

Uhle said the overall impetus to begin 826michigan was to help students succeed in school and in life. It was inspired by the San Francisco-based 826 National, but is a separate entity.

She also said coming to Detroit has "subconsciously" always been part of the overall plan. However, the combination of the organization being a tiny nonprofit and the economic recession meant it took 826michigan a while to get on its metaphorical feet.

By 2011, the organization felt ready to grow. The board unanimously decided that Detroit was where they wanted to be. "And so we developed a five-year plan and we're just delighted that DTE Energy Foundation funded us to get started," Uhle said.

The DTE Energy Foundation has provided a \$100,000 grant.

Uhle said the organization always had some presence in Detroit, including working with a teacher at University Prep Academy, coming to his classroom two days a week over a two-week period every spring, starting about 2007.

She also said it's good that 826michigan helped out, but was aware that one thing had to change: having volunteers from Ypsilanti or Ann Arbor coming into Detroit.

"Our goal is to have school-age students see volunteers from their own community assisting in the classroom and with writing workshops," Uhle said. "And that's what we were able to do with the grant."

Uhle said 826michigan ran the program in the three schools so that teachers could accomplish what they hoped to accomplish in their classrooms.

“Our belief is that teachers know exactly what they want to do in their classrooms and what needs to be done, but don’t have the help and the resources to do it,” she said. “So that’s what we provide.”

While most of the work 826michigan does is centered around writing and literacy, the organization isn’t limited to those areas. Uhle said that in one Bunche Elementary classroom they worked with students in math. Last term, the students worked on developing a board game. The teacher worked with them on probability and other math-related aspects; and 826michigan tutors helped them envision the creative piece in terms of the theme and the kind of “world” the game would involve.

At Earhart, 826michigan worked with eighth graders in their English classrooms, on a particular week’s assignment. Those students identified by the teacher as needing the most help worked one-on-one with one of 826michigan’s tutors for an hour a week.

At University Prep this year, 826michigan started working with fifth graders who needed extra help. Uhle said that she got to tutor there the other day and sat down with a fifth grader who was working on a poem.

“He was to read a poem and then write one of his own that was inspired by it,” she said. “You know, this was a student who really benefited from one adult sitting down and working through that process with him.”

Uhle said teachers have so many students in their classrooms that they can only help from one to three of them with their writing lessons.

“That works great, but usually there are 30-some other students that don’t get the help to work through that assignment,” she said. “So when we send in our tutors into the classroom, we can really build that one-on-one support that may students need, especially with writing, to get the job done.”

826michigan is currently helping with the summer school program at University Prep. It’s also offering creative writing drop-in workshops at Clark Park, the Campbell Branch of the Detroit Public library; and at Franklin-Wright Settlements. The creative writing workshop at Franklin-Wright Settlements on July 8 had kids writing a letter to a person or a thing that they can’t usually access. Uhle said the intern teaching that workshop used the example of writing to cinnamon rolls.

She also said eight or nine students read their letters aloud.

According to Uhle, the best part is the students made a list of who else they’d want to write to, so they not only went home with the letters they’d already written, but also with ideas for additional ones.

“That’s the kind of work we hope sustains students’ interest in writing and their ability to do it,” she said.

The students do their writing, for the most part, on lined paper with a pencil. Uhle said 826michigan was primarily interested in getting students to sit down and get started.

“We really believe that students benefit from the confidence they gain in just trying it out,” she said. “Many students are intimidated by the process of writing, which holds them back in academic settings; and certainly when it comes time to search for higher education or employment or other things, they feel intimidated. They feel, ‘I’m no good at writing.’ So we just want them to try.”

In some cases, 826michigan asks students to use a computer, but prefers the paper and pencil approach because Uhle said that’s more rare and challenging for students these days.

Asked if there’s anything about what 826michigan does that would come as a surprise to people, Uhle said it would be that the organization does more than teach creative writing.

“More of what we do is we support students’ engagement in school, generally, or in writing, specifically,” she said, adding that 826michigan builds the students’ confidence in things like asking for help.

826michigan offers a homework help program in both Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti. Uhle hopes to bring it to Detroit soon. However, 826michigan needs funding, as well as some more staff, to make the program happen in Detroit.

826michigan currently has seven people on staff.

Uhle said those who wish to volunteer should visit <http://www.826michigan.org/get-involved/volunteer/>