

826michigan's Mittenfest concert fundraiser celebrates 10th anniversary



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Over the years, 826michigan's Mittenfest fundraiser has grown into a popular music festival that lasts five days and features dozens of bands.

It didn't start out that way.

The event used to be a small way for the nonprofit to raise money for its organization, which provides tutoring and writing services for at-risk youth in Ann Arbor, Ypsilanti and Detroit.

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The first Mittenfest was described as an intimate affair at The Corner Brewery in Ypsilanti, located at 720 Norris Street.

826michigan employee Amy Sumerton was at the first Mittenfest.

"It was like being in your living room with your closest friends and favorite musicians," she said.

Sumerton said snow falling set the mood for the first Mittenfest, but she still wasn't sure about it being an annual event.

"I don't remember ever thinking, while planning the first one, that there would ever be another," she said. "Until about halfway through the day, when it became apparent, I think, to everyone in the room that this should be an annual event."

This year's event runs from Dec. 29 to Jan. 2 in the basement area of Bona Sera Restaurant, 200 W. Michigan Ave. in Ypsilanti. Thirty-five bands will play over the course of five nights. Entry is \$10 per night.

"The early years were very small," 826michigan executive director Amanda Uhle said. "It started as a one-day acoustic festival in The Corner Brewery in Ypsilanti."

Uhle said that although the event has grown in size, one thing has remained the same: the community is always eager to give.

Mittenfest has raised \$125,000 for the organization over the course of nine years.

But not all years are created equal in terms of how much money is raised. The event's first year brought in just \$1,000. After raising a **record-setting** \$27,000 in 2013 (just over 6 percent of its \$425,000 annual budget), Mittenfest brought in \$14,000 last year.

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The event was also five days in 2013 compared to four days in 2014, and in a different venue.

For years **Woodruff's in Ypsilanti** hosted the event, but after that bar closed in April 2014, the event moved to **The Blind Pig** in Ann Arbor.

This year, Uhle said the group is excited to be back in Ypsilanti.

"Ypsilanti is a region that is very much in our hearts," she said. "We provide a lot of services to a lot of kids there."

Uhle also said the fundraising gap between 2013 and 2014 isn't a very serious concern for the organization.

"The numbers go up and down from year to year," she said. "Last year was not our strongest financial year, but we also couldn't get the venue for New Year's Eve, which is usually our strongest night."

Looking forward, Uhle said the organization plans Mittenfest on a year-to-year basis, so as long as people are coming out and giving money the event will continue.

"All of the activities we do only work when people are interested and it's relevant," she said. "The interest in this event is really strong so there is continuing potential to do this work."

Uhle also said the organization isn't ready to commit to staying in Ypsilanti, even though the organization has strong ties there.

"I wouldn't say (staying in Ypsilanti) is permanent," she said. "We plan Mittenfest one year at a time. It's based on a venue opening their doors for us."

All Mittenfest performers are volunteers, as are most of the people who work with the event.

In total, at least 500 volunteers help out, Uhle said.

Tickets can be purchased at the door, and the recently announced lineup can be found **[here](#)**.

Geoff Preston covers general assignment news for MLive and The Ann Arbor News. He can be reached at gpreston@mlive.com or followed on Twitter at [@ByGeoffPreston](https://twitter.com/ByGeoffPreston).

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