

Features

A Hand Out

TANYA MUZUMDAR | THURSDAY, JANUARY 10, 2008

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"Joe the dragon didn't breathe fire, he breathed sushi. He had a crazy, curly mustache that was five miles long. Joe loved playing catch with cinderblocks, and he collected dragon stamps ..."

You can get to know Joe in *The Adventures of Joe the Dragon and Zegwen the Talking Bologna*, a tale written by students in a program run by [826 Michigan](#), the Ann Arbor non-profit devoted to teaching students age 6-18 the art of creative and expository writing. It's one of many Detroit-area volunteer corps, large and small, that invigorate communities by picking up where schools, private enterprise, and governments leave off.

Many, whether through teaching or other means, are volunteer-bound. Over 32% of Michigan residents offer their time and expertise, gratis, for an average 37 hours annually, per a 2007 Corporation for National and Community Service report.

"Financial resources are important, but putting money behind an issue isn't the only way you're going to make change," Patricia McCann, director of the George W. Romney Volunteer Center at the [United Way for Southeastern Michigan](#), believes. "It's really the human capital that makes a difference, that's going to change community conditions."

Pass the pen

While most educational organizations supplement school literacy efforts through reading tutorials, 826 Michigan focuses on the art of writing. After all, its parent, [826 Valencia](#), was founded in 2002 by [Dave Eggers](#), author of the best-selling *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, and former teacher Ninive Calegari. With the addition of the Ann Arbor chapter in 2005, 826 has grown to seven locales nationwide. The belief?


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One-on-one attention will help develop strong writing skills that are fundamental to future success.

Musicians, lawyers, teachers, and university students are among 826 Michigan's 125 active volunteer scribes set on passing their passion for the pen to the younger generation. "I think why some of us do it is it sort of takes you back a little bit," explains tutor and University of Michigan graduate student Rachel Lieberman.

The group offers unrestricted free drop-in tutoring and workshops for students to put ink to subjects not normally covered in the classroom: the killer college essay, comedic playwriting, and horror writing not being the least of them. Some students even see their names in print, in either their own books or the group's annual teen-edited book of scribbles, aptly titled *Vacansopaporosophobia* – "fear of a blank page."

Each year, tutors also visit about 20 schools dealing with sub-par written test scores. Contrary to expectation, assistance isn't only in English classes. Often, "we'll be in a science classroom and we'll let the teacher teach the science lesson and then we step in and help [students] write about that subject in a creative, engaging way," says 826 Michigan's Executive Director Amanda Uhle.

The group plans to expand school programs, now primarily in Ypsilanti, deeper into Wayne County and beyond, says Uhle. "That is such a powerful thing for students to feel they are competent in the writing area and also what they write is valued by their communities, teachers, parents, and other adults that are mentoring them," she explains. "It's about expressing themselves and being confident in that way and opening up more possibilities for their careers and their lives. We see that a lot – we see kids who learn to call themselves writers and that's exciting."

A legacy of help

The organization most synonymous with charity is, of course, the United Way. The organization is a community leader and invaluable resource, matching thousands of volunteers with 300 to 400 other agencies in the tri-county area. A recent search for Detroit area opportunities on its website yielded nearly 400 choices.

The non-profit also places thousands annually in its own programming to fill areas where business and government fall short. Its earned income tax credit program recruits volunteers to become certified tax preparers and places them at free income tax assistance sites for low and moderate-income families, many of whom are unaware of their eligibility for the credit. Accordingly, raising their purchasing power puts green back into the local economy – to the tune of \$1 million in 2006, says McCann, who characterizes the 100 volunteer effort as "another way in which people are using their skills or learning a new skill to make change in a community."

Full house

Nowhere is a volunteer heritage more evident than at the 75-plus year-old [Community House](#) in Birmingham. It's best known for offering 800 educational classes per year, with content running from the intense – Chinese language; to lighter fare – "Face Reading For Singles".

Last summer, over 30,000 metro Detroiters passed through the doors of this exemplary local fixture – an undeniable part of Birmingham's vitality. President and CEO Shelley Roberts says, "I know when people move into town, the realtors point out what the Community House has to offer ... it definitely adds something to the community and I think the [city manager and mayor] would be the first to agree."

Thousands of citizens donate upwards of 10,000 hours annually to coordinate classes and plan events like the Jazz fest, art show, and youth theater performances. The non-profit also runs several respected community outreach programs – in 2005, its Race Relations and Diversity Task Force received the Closing the Gap award from [New Detroit](#), a race issues leadership coalition.

Volunteers bring "all kinds of skills from people in the garden club who come and help pull weeds to retired executives who come and help us do our business forecasting," says Roberts, adding that the scale and scope of the Community House's programming is unparalleled in the local area – and nationally admired as well. "I get calls all the time from all over the country from people who would like to copy it in their communities."

Wild and free

Those yearning to serve outside walled confines will find the wild at close hand in local parks.

"At various times, and it's just when they've done master plans for parks and recreation,

[cities have] always had nature programs – and the city doesn't put tax dollars into them," Bob Muller, program director and founding member of the [Royal Oak Nature Society](#), explains. Hence, the society formed in 2001 to handle programming, trail maintenance, and infrastructure projects in Royal Oak's Tenhave Woods and Cummingston Park.

Muller credits the society's efforts with bringing locals in to walk and jog the formerly deserted parks, where 300 different plants and 45 members of the arbor family, including the Hop-hornbeam and the tree-of-heaven, grace the grounds.

Last year, nearly 1,600 people enjoyed the free year-round programs. Frequent naturalist-led weekend and nighttime nature walks include activities both academic – wildflower identification; and charming – owl hoots to coax replies from the great horned and screech owls lurking in the trees. And speakers present topics on all earthly levels, ranging from the underground fossils of the [Middle Devonian](#) Michigan basin to the celestial bodies glittering in the night skies high above.

"If you want someone to do volunteer work, you look for the busiest person around and ask them because busy people are stupid enough to do more," advises Muller, a model volunteer. The General Motors engineer guides most of the society's nature walks and boasts 40 years of Boy Scout leadership to boot.

"With less than 20 [volunteers] we're putting on this kind of program, which I think is phenomenal. It doesn't take a lot sometimes, it just takes several individuals," Muller says. "People have to do everything from reading to the infirm to having baseball for kids to having this nature society to all of these things that flesh out and add the real bulk to a community and to our society – those aren't done with tax dollars It's people that just enjoy doing it and want to do it."

Tanya Muzumdar is a regular contributor to metromode. Read her previous article [Double Lives: Aliccia Berg & Bob Zabor](#).

Photographs:

826 Michigan students - photo courtesy Amy Sumerton

teen-edited book "Vacansopaprosophobia " - photo courtesy Angi Stevens

United Way volunteers - photo courtesy United Way

Shelley Roberts, president and CEO of the Birmingham Community House

Bob Muller at Tenhave Woods

Photographs by [Marvin Shaouni](#)