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A2Awesome provides Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti artists with \$1,000 grants to put toward 'the creation of awesome'

By Tom Perkins



Ypsilanti photographer Bill Streety, one of A2Awesome's grant recipients, points his camera toward the stage during open mic night at the Tap Room.

Tom Perkins | For AnnArbor.com

Ann Arbor-based photographer **Bill Streety** has spent years pointing his camera lens at local blues and jazz legends.

Now, with the help of a \$1,000 grant from the [Ann Arbor Awesome Foundation](#), Streety will self-publish a book of photos of those musicians that he will donate to local schools, libraries and the bands themselves.

Then he plans to spin off a Web site of the photos that includes the bands' bios, extra photos, and more information on the groups, which include[Bluescasters](#), [BDI Blues Band](#), [Lady Sunshine and the X Band](#), [Chris Canas](#), [Paul Keller](#), [Mr. B](#) and more.

Streety said he is pleased to be able to document the work and the lives of musicians who sometimes play in obscurity but have fascinating stories behind their lives. Some played with legends such as Smokey Robinson and the Stylistics, and all "did live the dream and their passion for their music burns deep."

He says he wants to give these musicians some acknowledgement and their 15 minutes of fame with a small run of books.

"These are folks who have a passion for the music," he said. "They'll come out and give 110 percent whether there is 25 or 250 people watching. They all have day jobs, this is not how they make their living, but it's fun for them and they are extremely talented."

He said he was thrilled when he learned A2Awesome was supporting his cause.

"You can't even imagine my surprise that they thought my idea was awesome. That was really cool! I couldn't believe it!" he said.

Last month, the A2 Awesome Foundation awarded three \$1,000 grants "toward the creation of awesomeness in the Ann Arbor - Ypsilanti area," which also included funding for performance artist **Trevor Stone** and **826michigan's Amanda Uhle**.

The no-strings-attached grants are more like cash gifts designed to provide a financial boost for projects that might not be able to find funding through traditional channels, but would benefit the community in some way.

People submit their project proposals to the A2Awesome board, which awards money on a nearly monthly basis to projects that the board feels are the most inspiring and will have a positive impact on the community. A2Awesome includes 13 members who contribute \$100 a month toward a \$1,000 grant. So far, the group has awarded \$9,000 toward local projects.

With the help of A2Awesome cash, Uhle and 826michigan will be able to transport students from a tutoring/writing program at **Ypsilanti Middle School** to the 826 creative writing center in downtown Ann Arbor several times a year.

Last year, 50 kids participated in 826michigan's YMS program, and Uhle said it's as much a community of kids and their families as it is a place where students can get help with their homework and sharpen their writing skills.

The **826 organization** is an internationally recognized non-profit launched in 2002 by author **Dave Eggers**.

Last year, the 826michigan YMS students published a book, "**What to Call the Place I Call Home**", and Uhle said she is excited that the kids will be able to see it for sale on the shelf at the Ann Arbor writing center.

The downtown Ann Arbor 826michigan "training lab" also offers a wide range of programs, Uhle said. With the A2Awesome funds, YMS students can take advantage of the center and gain more from 826michigan than is possible in the standard setting at YMS.

Uhle praised A2Awesome's support of small but awesome projects that would struggle without an extra push.

"I think it's an incredible foundation, and a wonderful affiliation for us locally and nationally," Uhle said.

Trevor Stone is one-third of the core of the **Spontaneous Art** group, which also includes local artists **Natalie Berry** and **Chris Sandon**.

Stone explained Spontaneous Art's performances are held in public places and typically involve an unsuspecting public. The group members design their own costumes and develop their own skits, which thus far regularly take place at the **Chicago Museum of Modern Art** and the **Smithsonian Institution** in Washington, D.C.

The A2Awesome funds will help bring Spontaneous Art to Washtenaw County.

"We blur art and life, and reside at the intersection of improv comedy, social experiment and sincere interpersonal connections," Stone said.

While the performances are often humorous, they are designed to get strangers to connect. People who become involved in the Spontaneous Art skits have been known to leave with a new recipe or a new tennis partner, Stone said.

Spontaneous Art won't reveal any information about upcoming performances (then it wouldn't be spontaneous, would it?) but they will be found in Chelsea, Dexter, Ann Arbor, Ypsilanti and Saline.

Ypsilanti blogger and A2Awesome's dean, **Mark Maynard**, said unlike traditional grants, there is no real followup or oversight on how people spend their money, but the group is careful in its selections.

"Basically we place tiny bets on people and hope they do the right thing," Maynard said.

Streety said he hopes to use the money to develop a starting point for a larger project or possibly larger run of books that the community can use to learn about the area's jazz and blues musicians for years.

The Awesome Foundation was created in Boston in 2009 and there are now more than 30 chapters nationally and three in Michigan, including Grand Rapids and Detroit. Among the A2Awesome group is **Lisa Dengiz**, a co-founder of multiple local nonprofits, including the Neutral Zone; **Linh Song**, who is involved with software startups and nonprofits, including starting Mam Non; Zingerman's co-founder **Paul Saginaw**; Domestic Arts Custom Cakes founder **Tanya Luz**; Treetown Toys and Dragonfly Depot founder **Hans Masing**; **Jeff Meyers**, managing editor of Concentrate Media, managing editor of Metromode and a Metro Times film critic; **Heather MacKenzie**, a self-described "enthusiast for good ideas"; Dogma CatmanToo founder **Alice Liberson**; mediator and former civil rights lawyer **Dick Soble**; **Monique Deschaine**, founder of Al Dente pasta company; **Omari Rush**, education manager for the University Musical Society and **Larry Gant**.