

PEOPLE



Amanda Uhle

By Amanda Lewan
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The nonprofit writing center [826michigan](#) recently expanded their programming in Detroit, where there's an estimated functional illiteracy rate of 47% in the metropolitan area. What does this mean for a national organization that's attracted the likes of best-selling authors David Sedaris, Sarah Vowell, and Zadie Smith? Executive Director Amanda Uhle says while it's about increasing literacy, it's also about empowering and engaging Detroit students.

The program first established their mentoring and creative writing sessions in Ann Arbor in 2005. After operating for eight years in Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti, the team was established enough to get started in Detroit.

Project



826michigan
www.826michigan.org



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Detroit, Michigan

"We were growing with the Detroit area students more than anywhere else," says Amanda. "I wanted to come to Detroit the whole time, but as a very small organization getting on our feet when the economy in Michigan was suffering, it was challenging."

They first came to Detroit in 2007 for a special program with University Prep Academy. Bringing volunteers from Ann Arbor wasn't ideal for 826michigan, who really wanted students to see their neighbors pitching in and helping their communities. When the organization received a grant from DTE Energy Foundation they were able to expand to the city.

The national organization has eight centers around the country with hopes of establishing 40 more in the near future. As a national nonprofit, 826 wanted to continue to expand the model in Michigan, and the opportunity to come to Detroit seemed fitting. Amanda described it as the right kind of growth for 826michigan.

Amanda Uhle first joined 826 in the summer of 2006, bringing with her a background in arts and administration. She graduated with a dual major in art and communications from Concordia University in Chicago, and served as a Vice President of the Ann Arbor Arts Center. Her passion lies in finding the opportunities in creative people and projects and helping make them feasible. While she

leads the organization, she always carries with her an air of gratitude in her voice. She's exponentially grateful for the network of volunteers and donors that help 826michigan continue to work with students every day.

The program teaches students to learn how to write and think creatively, but it also empowers them to take control of their schoolwork. It gives them confidence to succeed in school.

"We make it fun and easy, and take away the stigma from asking for help," says Amanda. "We really think students should be empowered to ask for help and see it as normal. It's all a part of the Detroit model in classrooms and after school programs. We want that attitude to stick with them as they enter higher education and also later on in the workforce."

Currently [826michigan shares space in the Model D house](#) and can be found in the Franklin-Wright Settlement, Clark Park, and as a branch of the Detroit Public Library, with their own permanent site for Detroit coming in the next couple of years.

"The best part of my job is seeing people give," Amanda says, referring to the combined 500 volunteers working with students through their program. "People give their time and their ideas and skills in ways that are just profound to watch."

The program is centered on giving back: giving back to youth, the community, and the future by preparing the next generation of urban leaders and innovators in Detroit.

All photos by Doug Coombe.