



Ann Arbor-based 'robot shop' successfully expanding to help Detroit students

Robot-shop.jpg

826michigan, an Ann Arbor-based nonprofit robot shop and writing center, is expanding to Detroit. (Courtesy 826michigan Facebook)

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ANN ARBOR, MI- **Liberty Street Robot Supply & Repair** is a dream store for many children.

Looking into the Ann Arbor storefront at 115 E. Liberty St., they can see everything from robot “food” and oil to robot hands and build centers. It’s a place that **children come for the robots**, but stay for the educational experiences.

Yes, educational experiences. Behind a red curtain in the store is a place where thousands of students have come for help with writing.

The store owner, 826michigan, is a volunteer-driven nonprofit serving nearly 2,500 students aged 6-18 with free programs centered around providing one-on-one attention to underserved students in public classrooms, libraries, and 826michigan’s center with their creative and expository writing skills. The robot supply store, which now contributes about \$75,000 annually to the nonprofit, was one way to debunk the negative connotation that students may have about asking for help.

Now, the eight-year-old nonprofit organization **has successfully started helping students in Detroit** with ambitions of opening another robot-type store and writing center in Detroit.

“We’re right where we want to be,” 826michigan executive director Amanda Uhle told **MLive** during an interview earlier this month in Ann Arbor. “Our goals now are to fully fund our next year of programming in Detroit, to find even more volunteers to help us do that work, and then to expand our work in schools.”

Uhle originally announced the expansion in **October during TEDxDetroit**. The expansion -- capable thanks to a \$100,000 grant from the DTE Energy Foundation -- has allowed the organization to provide free programs in Detroit public schools with Metro Detroit volunteers.

By the end of this past school year, 826michigan opened office space in Detroit and started working with schools in February. The organization this year worked with Detroit Public Schools’ Bunche Elementary-Middle School and Earhart Elementary-Middle School and University Preparatory Academy’s Ellen Thompson Elementary.

Uhle said the organization, which has about 25 volunteers in Detroit (more than 2,000 in the state), knows it won’t solve all

of **DPS' problems**, but it can help provide students with the tools and knowledge needed to succeed.

"That's something our students really gain," she said. "Even if we don't give them all the answers or teach them everything they need to know, they have the agency to do things for themselves that are important to their own education, future employment and all kinds of better life skills."

Uhle said the organization hopes to have some type of storefront, such as the one in Ann Arbor in the next 16 months, as part of the organization's plan to **expand in Detroit by the 2017-2018 school-year**.

826michigan also hopes to continue growing partnerships with local universities. Uhle said she met with WSU officials earlier this month in hopes of growing its programs and volunteers.

"I don't know that we have a formal and firm update to announce on that, but it's worth mentioning that we have an important and growing partnership with the WSU Honors College, whose faculty is helping us connect to students interested in community service," she wrote in an email to **MLive**. "We're also discussing with them how we might fit into their community-wide focus on adult literacy."

And even though the school year is over, 826michigan continues to hold sessions for Detroit students at Clark Park, Franklin-Wright Settlement and Campbell Detroit Public Library branches.

Since joining the organization in 2006, Uhle has grown the nonprofit by opening the robot store, attracting thousands of volunteers, expanding programs and pumping up its budget from \$160,000 in 2006 to \$350,000 this year.

Uhle said besides opening up the second shop in Detroit, other goals are to double all of its operations, including: programming to 5,000 students, a 10-person staff and budget to \$700,000-\$750,000 annually.

"I believe we'll have a very long lasting impact on all the students we serve now in Detroit and elsewhere," Uhle said.

826michigan is part of the national **826 writing centers network**. The organization was founded by writer Dave Eggers in 2002 at 826 Valencia St. in San Francisco, which also operates as a pirate store in its storefront.

For more information and programming from 826michigan, visit its website at **826michigan.org**.

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