

KnightBlog

ARTS

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Author Angela Flournoy headlines fundraiser for new 826michigan location in Detroit

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Posted by Rosie Sharp

Above: 826michigan staff member Courtney Randolph working with a student at Roberto Clemente Academy in Detroit. Photo courtesy of 826michigan.

For the last decade, **826michigan** has operated the Liberty Street Robot Supply & Repair in Ann Arbor, Mich.—just one in a network of locations across the state and country whose humorously nonsensical business facades front a series of reading and writing learning labs staffed by volunteer tutors. Last year, volunteers gave more than 23,000 hours to 826michigan: tutoring algebra, teaching poetry workshops, staffing the robot store, filing paperwork and more.

The organization recently received a **\$150,000 Knight Arts Challenge** grant to open a Detroit facility, which will be located in the city's Eastern Market. In support of the effort, 826michigan will be hosting its annual fundraising dinner next month at the newly

renovated Grand Army of the Republic Building, with author Angela Flournoy as a special guest speaker. Flournoy's first novel, "The Turner House," is set in Detroit and was a finalist for the 2015 National Book Award.

Amanda Uhle, executive director of 826michigan, took some time out during a busy week to share some insight into 826michigan's activities and its upcoming 'Parka Weather' fundraiser on Feb. 11.



Fourth grade students on a creative writing field trip at 826michigan's Ann Arbor location. Photo courtesy of 826michigan.

Tell us more about your Knight Arts Challenge project and how your upcoming fundraiser will support your proposal.

Our Knight Arts grant is to support the opening of our center in Eastern Market, including the full range of youth arts programs we offer. We currently send 826michigan tutors to several Detroit public and charter classrooms to provide additional one-on-one help to

students. We also provide drop-in creative writing opportunities at neighborhood library branches in Detroit. All of this work will increase exponentially when we are able to open our center in Eastern Market. The location will also allow us to add creative writing field trips for Detroit schools and daily homework help–tutoring that will be open to all students ages 8 to 18. Funds raised at the dinner will go toward our \$150,000 [grant] match.

“Fostering a love of literature” seems like a particular challenge in a city with such a high illiteracy rate. What sort of tactics, if any, will 826 bring to bear on the situation?

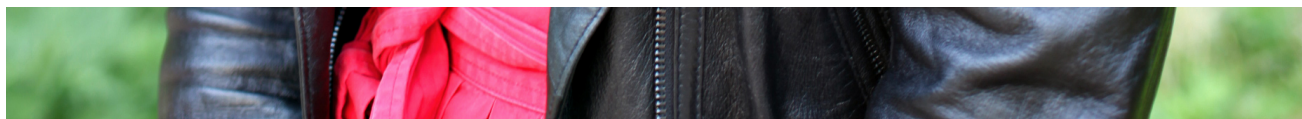
Books are very important to us at 826michigan. We surround ourselves and our students with limitless opportunities to read and to write, which I think is essential. Specifically, 826michigan staff and volunteers are offering students a chance to read and write more and in different ways than they may otherwise be able to access. Hundreds of our students also have the chance to publish their original writing in our books. This is essential. Publishing students’ writing not only demonstrates to young people that their ideas matter to us, it also sends a message to the world: Detroit children are important and deserve our attention.

Where do your tutors come from, and is there a good way for interested volunteers to get involved?

Adults who are interested in working with us as volunteers should visit [the 826michigan website]. We have opportunities that are drop-in and short-term, as well as longer-term commitments to our classroom work. There is a wide range of volunteer opportunity in Ypsilanti and Ann Arbor. In Detroit, our opportunities are ever expanding, and we expect that in the next year, when our Eastern Market space is open, we’ll be able to offer even more flexibility and diversity in those volunteer opportunities. Because of our emphasis on meeting students’ individual needs, we’re able to work with hundreds of adult volunteers and many times support our adult volunteers’ individual goals and interests along the way.







Author Angela Flournoy. Photo courtesy of Flournoy.

“The Turner House” is set in Detroit. Is that part of what led you to choose Angela Flournoy as the special guest for February’s fundraising dinner?

Several of us on staff have read “The Turner House,” and its Detroit setting makes it a perfect book to celebrate in the city. 826michigan holds an annual dinner, normally in the fall, combining a few great ingredients that we think make a perfect party: delicious food from a prominent chef, an unusual location, and a fascinating author and book. This year, guests will have a chance to explore an upper floor of the castle known as the Grand Army of the Republic Building, will taste a custom menu by Chef Sarah Welch of Republic, and will meet Ms. Flournoy, who will read from her novel and talk about the importance of writing and books in her own life.

I hear that Detroit’s 826 facility will be a robot factory—interesting in the context of our relationship with manufacturing. What can we expect from the Detroit location?

It’s high time to expand our robot retail presence [in Ann Arbor] to include the manufacturing side of things. All 826 locations are fronted by a seemingly-unrelated offbeat retail store: pirates in San Francisco, spies in Chicago. Our stores function in a few key ways: Not only do they generate community interest in our work and funds to pay our overhead, but they also encourage the kind of spirit and curiosity that sets the tone for our youth writing and tutoring programs. The Eastern Market location will be no different. Most of the space will be devoted to student writing programs. The street-level space will be a robot novelty store with a factory aesthetic. The store, the programs and the people involved will be centered on joy and learning.

826michigan’s Parka Weather fundraiser will be held on Feb. 11 at the Grand Army of the Republic Building (1942 Grand River, Detroit) from 7-10 p.m. Tickets are \$125. VIP tickets, which include a cocktail reception from 6-7 p.m. and a signed book, are \$250.

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