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Creative writing nonprofit to add Eastern Market hub

By [Sherri Welch](#)

Ann Arbor-based **826michigan** plans to bring robots and children to Eastern Market's Winder Street this fall, with the opening of the **Detroit Robot Factory** store and a creative writing and tutoring lab.

The affiliate of **826 National**, a San Francisco-based nonprofit co-founded by novelist Dave Eggers, has signed a long-term lease for a 400-square-foot storefront and about 3,500 square feet of space on the second floor of 1351 Winder St., around the corner from **Rocky's Historic Eastern Market**.

Renovations to the space began early this spring and are expected to wrap up in July in time to furnish the space for an October opening. Detroit-based **Laavu Studio** is the architect on the project.

826michigan has raised about \$1.1 million toward a \$1.5 million target to fund the Eastern Market site and to expand its programs in the city, Executive Director Amanda Uhle said.

That includes grants of \$150,000 from both the West Bloomfield Township-based **Dresner Foundation** and the Miami-based **John S. and James L. Knight Foundation**, \$200,000 from the Troy-based **Kresge Foundation** and a \$30,000 grant over three years from the Indianapolis-based **Robert & Toni Bader Charitable Foundation**, whose founders had grandparents who worked in Eastern Market years ago.

The new site will enable 826michigan to expand the creative writing programs it has offered in Detroit classrooms and local libraries for the past three years, and to begin offering free after-school, drop-in tutoring and creative writing workshops on subjects from silly to serious and opportunities for students to get their writing published.

Affiliates of 826 use a storefront to attract children and inquisitive passersby.

In downtown Ann Arbor, the storefront is called the **Liberty Street Robot Supply & Repair**, which sells robot kits and robot-themed novelties and toys that produce enough revenue to cover rent, Uhle said.

In Eastern Market, it will operate the Detroit Robot Factory, selling similar products but also new Detroit-centric ones developed by local graphic designers and artists.

The site will host creative writing field trips for area schools, tutoring beginning in January, and creative writing workshops and related programs later in 2017.

"We're at the point where we've recruited so many volunteers and work with so many educators and students and families that the next step is to have a full-service, drop-in center that's open to all," Uhle said.

Last year, 826michigan reached 3,200 students, more than 500 of them in Detroit. Its 2015 surveys designed to gauge its impact found:

- 100 percent of teachers whose classrooms visited 826michigan for a field trip viewed the organization as a good resource for teachers.
- 73 percent of students who participated in its most recent book publishing project said at the beginning of the project that they liked to write. By the end of the school year, 100 percent said they liked writing.
- 89 percent of students who visited 826michigan for after-school tutoring said they felt more confident completing their homework on site with the nonprofit.

"We also look at things like attendance as well at our drop-in programs to determine if the programs are still relevant," Uhle said, noting that an increasing number of students are being served across the board in its programs.

About 600 volunteers with 826michigan work with students on writing and tutoring, staffing the store and planning special events. About 100 of them are in Detroit, Uhle said, noting the organization will need many more to fully launch all of its programs.

This year, the organization is operating on a budget of about \$825,000, with revenue coming from grants, donations, events and its store sales. That's up from \$425,000 in 2013, when it was named a finalist in *Crain's* Best Managed Nonprofit contest.

It employs nine people who work between Detroit, Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti, where 826 takes over **Beezy's Café** in the evenings for drop-in tutoring.

As 826 ramps up new programs at the Eastern Market site, it's looking for a program coordinator, "someone who has deep connections in the Detroit education community and who respects school-age students and their work in the way we do and can help coordinate the program with educators, volunteers and the public," Uhle said.

826michigan has built strong relationships with students, families and volunteers across the city over the past few years, Kresge said.

"In addition to serving as a hub for programs, the Detroit Robot Factory will meaningfully contribute to the vibrancy and range of activity in Eastern Market, complementing other unique spaces for creative expression such as **Signal-Return**, the **Red Bull House of Art** and **Salt & Cedar** alongside all of the many important amenities that draw thousands to the market every week," said George Jacobsen, senior program officer.

In addition to enlivening the street where it is located, 826michigan is helping repurpose an older building that would be hard to convert to food use, while also supporting Russell Street as a primary shopping district, said **Eastern Market Corp.** President Dan Carmody.

"Its focus on youth and families helps us to keep the Eastern Market District a place that welcomes everybody," he said.

Correction: An earlier version of this story had an incorrect number for the percentage of students who visited 826michigan for after-school tutoring and said they felt more confident completing their homework on site with the nonprofit. The correct percentage is 89 percent.

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