

Detroit kids to get robots and creative writing too



STATE OF OPPORTUNITY By TRACY SAMILTON • January 20, 2016

826michigan - a free tutoring and creative writing center for kids - is setting up a new shop.

The group has already helped thousands of school-aged children in Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti write poetry or just get their algebra homework done, and now it hopes to do the same in Detroit.

"My invention is called the Crazy Boom," Mohamed Conde reads from his short story at 826michigan's writing center in Ann Arbor.

"I can go back to prehistoric times. Like if I wanted to see George Washington or a dinosaur, I could because of my invention. My brain is bigger than Albert Einstein's. Ten times bigger."

The story has some unexpected twists. Conde uses Crazy Boom to go back in time and befriend George Washington. He convinces George to chop down the cherry tree, then he lies about it, but there's still a happy ending.

"I got grounded because of George's dad - but we were still best friends," he finishes. 826michigan publishes about 250 stories like this every year.

Volunteers also help tutor kids who are struggling with math or reading or getting homework assignments completed.

Mohamed Soumaoro is a junior at Pioneer High School. He's been coming to 826michigan in Ann Arbor for two years now. The tutoring, and the structure, have helped him keep up his grade point average.

"I do sports and it's hard for me to do homework at home," Soumaoro explains. "They (his parents) thought it was a really good connection to come here, do my homework and then I can go do my extracurriculars."

Volunteers come from all walks of life including retirees, college students, and working folk.

826michigan is financed by two things, donations and proceeds from its stores.

The stores have a robot theme sure to put your average seven year old at ease. There are robot books, robot kits, robot posters. There's an incredibly rude coin-operated robot that burps and spouts random digits of pi to get attention.



The Detroit site will eventually have a store like this too.

Amanda Uhle takes me on a tour of the site they've chosen - near Eastern Market - a long, narrow two story section of a warehouse built in 1895 with three big windows at one end of the second story and three big windows at the other.

"And you can see the ceiling is pretty high, so I think it's going to be a dramatic entrance for the Detroit Robot Factory," she enthuses.

Uhle says for some kids, 826michigan is one of the few place they've gotten one-on-one attention from a caring adult. Homework matters. Their ideas and creativity matter.

While she acknowledges that creative writing is more intangible than what some other non-profits do, like feeding low income kids or keeping them out of danger on the streets, she says it often has a lasting effect on their self-esteem and confidence.

"A corner can be turned at that moment I think in a young person's life," says Uhle. "No matter what else happens in their lives, they can look back and say, 'I did something that was so important and so good and was so respected by others, that it's in a book. It's in a real book.'"



Uhle says transportation is an issue for kids in Ypsilanti and Ann Arbor, and it will be an issue in Detroit, too. The group may transport some volunteers to schools, rather than try to get all the kids to the center.

826michigan is in the middle of fundraising right now for the Detroit site. They're halfway to raising \$150 thousand dollars to match a grant from the Knight Foundation.

Uhle's wish list is both simple and big. They need volunteers, money, and construction materials. She hopes to open the Detroit Robot Factory this summer, with tutoring and writing workshops starting in the fall.