

Downtown Ann Arbor writing center collaborates with community



Volunteer Carman Judd keeps busy at the counter of 826's retail store.

Washtenaw Voice

BY JENELLE FRANKLIN • January 20, 2016

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Taking kids out of a classroom, and lifting limitations students hadn't realized society created for them is one major goal of 826 Michigan. The non-profit organization, based in Ann Arbor, focuses on supporting students' creative and expository writing skills, in Ann Arbor, Detroit and Ypsilanti.

826 Michigan, founded in 2005, is one of seven chapters of 826 National, founded in 2002. Amanda Uhle, executive director of 826 Michigan, started in 2006 and has a team of 2,500 registered adult volunteers, serving over 3,000 students ages 8-18 per year. 826 annually publishes “OMNIBUS,” a collection of the best student writing from the previous year. “When we can help one child to realize they can go beyond the limits they thought they were stuck with, that is when it is a success,” Uhle said. “A lot of my job is working with the community... We are fortunate that we have such a motivated and talented staff. They handle things here quite well on their own.”

Volunteer staff member for one year, Carman Judd of East Lansing, drives an hour to help host field trips, provide tutoring and work behind the front counter at the organization. Every 826 location has its own unique storefront. Foot traffic coming into the downtown Ann Arbor location often varies, and can sometimes be caught off guard by what’s actually inside. “There’s the 826 tourists, the people who are confused about a robot shop, and the people who are confused this isn’t a real robot supply store,” Judd said.

Between Fourth and Main, 115 E. Liberty sits 826. Jenelle Franklin | Washtenaw Voice
826’s atmosphere is not like that of a traditional school, and the location provides a learning place downtown. The storefront has a shop bot that recites Pi and will sing for pocket change. Through the red curtains, there is a learning area with couches, computers, tables and chairs, where students can spend time and comfortably do their work.

826 is reaching into the community of students who have aspirations for college, by attracting many Ypsilanti and Ann Arbor residents. Thomas Zimmerman, full-time instructor and head of the Writing Center at Washtenaw Community College, acknowledges there are important skills needed to be considered a professional.

“Writing is one of the most important professional skills,” Zimmerman said. “Communicating appropriately is more important now. Essay writing has lessened, but writing skills are always essential.”

One major connection Uhle has made for 826 is with Kevin Spall, president of publishing company Thomson-Shore Inc. in Dexter – the company which also publishes WCC’s literary journal, the Huron River Review.

He said the Dexter publishing company has been working with 826 Michigan as their primary charitable cause for nearly a decade, encouraging students to write and get published. “It all started as a (pro-bono) business arrangement, and quickly became a supportive collaboration,” Spall said.

Not only does 826 collaborate with this local publishing company, but WCC graphic design instructor Kevin Woodland has also contributed to the cause. Woodland was involved with design for multiple “OMNIBUS” publications in the past. As a former designer of the anthology, he enjoyed working to help students put together a professional collection of their hard work. He currently looks forward to possible future collaborations on the project.

“OMNIBUS was a really fun project, and a great way for students to showcase their work,” Woodland said.

Follow 826 Michigan on Instagram with #OnwardRobots to see the ideas Judd puts together with shop items during her shifts, and #Shop826 to follow the national 826 chain.

All current and future Writing Center staff are encouraged by Zimmerman to check out the opportunities at 826.