
DETROIT

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Fantastic beasts and where to find them

826Michigan fashions metal creatures to help students

By Sarah Rose Sharp

Imagine you're a student at the end of an eight-hour school day. What could possibly compel you to tackle another couple of hours of schoolwork or tutoring with any sort of enthusiasm?

How about a ride in a giant, metal, bicycle-powered pangolin?

Nonprofit learning hub 826Michigan is all about providing access to school supplies, tutors, and teacher-directed support in classrooms to students — and that means meeting them where they're at.

As Amanda Uhle, executive director at 826Michigan, points out, the role of its volunteers is often to provide encouragement or act as a sounding board for ideas — essentially capacity-building for teachers with crowded classrooms and parents with crowded lifestyles.

"It literally looks like adults kneeling next to desks saying, 'What do you think? How can we start?'" Uhle says. "Our experience is that students know what to do, but that barrier of confidence, that agency — it might be a very simple thing that is the difference between someone getting started or hanging back."

Sometimes the barriers are more substantial — such as Detroit's lack of reliable public transportation, which poses a challenges for students trying to gain access to available resources, such as the regular drop-in tutoring hours that will begin in January at 826Michigan's much-anticipated new Detroit Robot Factory location in Detroit's Eastern Market.

If there's one thing 826Michigan knows about, it is meeting substantial challenges with fantastical solutions. Best-selling author and magnate of independent publishing, Dave Eggers, who co-founded the 826National organization in 2002 along with award-winning educator Nínive Calegari, seems to love nothing more than imagining inventive strategies to raise awareness for the needs of students. In order to raise awareness of the need for safe and comprehensive public transportation in Detroit, Eggers designed a mini-herd of animal-inspired vehicles for an exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit.

"I was a studio art major for much of my time in college," Eggers says. "And I still think about certain issues and themes in visual terms. A few years ago, I visited the Boggs School and when the idea of 826Michigan's Eastern Market space was first imagined, there was this question of how kids from Boggs would get to 826 for after-school tutoring and programming. It's only a mile or so away, but that distance can be daunting for a 7-year-old. So the animal bikes became a solution."

The designs, created by Eggers, were brought into reality by Gizmo, a fabrication studio in San Francisco, and Detroit-based artist and metalsmith Juan Martinez and his team in Detroit. These bike sculpture/puppets pose a formidable challenge of balancing aesthetics and safety, which Martinez took very seriously.

"I'm thrilled to have the opportunity to create these awesome pedal-powered animals," Martinez says. "In building these from Dave's initial drawings, I took great care in making sure the kids wouldn't get snagged or cut by the metal on these animals. I lined all touch surfaces with bike tires and heavy-duty vinyl and carefully sanded any edges.

"But the aesthetics are what really get the kids all excited to ride in them and illicit joy from people who see them out on the streets."

A few weeks ago, the bikes took a few test-runs around Shed 5 at Eastern Market, and *The Spirit of the Animals Is in the Wheels*, which opened on Nov. 4 at MOCAD and runs in the DEPE Space Exhibition area through Jan. 1. The exhibition offers museumgoers and bike enthusiasts a chance to see these strange and inventive wheeled creatures in captivity, before they are eventually set loose on the streets of Detroit, to facilitate connections between students who love to learn and the volunteers and program staff who love to support them in that aim.

"Clearly, we aren't going to get every one of our 826Michigan students on one of these bikes — it's not going to solve the whole problem," Uhle says. "But every young person knows what a bike is, and every young person knows about animals — and usually they like both of those things. So it's this beautiful combination of the two."

The official opening celebration for *The Spirit of the Animals is in the Wheelstook* place at MOCAD on Nov. 10, following the "Eat Your Words" gala, a fundraiser for 826Michigan's programming around metro Detroit, including their presence in dozens of classrooms in Detroit and Ypsilanti schools. The evening featured delights from some of Detroit's up-and-coming culinary establishments, including Katoï, La Rondinella, Selden Standard, Two James Distillery, and Sister Pie, and storytelling by Detroit powerhouse and former *Metro Times* editor Desiree Cooper, the hilarious beer heiress Frances Stroh, and of course, Eggers.

There are other ways to contribute to 826Michigan's efforts. You can contribute programming funds to their online campaign that just broke its goal, pick up hilarious holiday gifts for the robot-lover in your life when the Detroit Robot Factory storefront opens for business on Dec. 3, attend Mittenfest 2016 — the popular Ypsilanti music festival which has raised more than \$100,000 for 826Michigan over the last 10 years — or volunteer your time to help support students. Whichever way you choose, proceeds help get extra hands in classrooms and ever-more students being happily transported to the learning lab.

"I look forward to creating more [bikes], and having giant pedal-powered animals full of excited children running rampant all over Detroit," Martinez says.

Who wouldn't?

Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit is located at 4454 Woodward Ave., Detroit; mocadetroit.org; 313-832-6622.