

Ypsi kids write book about fictional and real-life superheroes



Copies of *In the Clouds Over Ypsilanti*. **Photo by Nicole Haley**

It's a bird! It's a plane! It's a group of Ypsilanti sixth-graders who recently became published authors of a collection of fictional and nonfictional superhero stories.

Jennifer Gray's sixth-grade class at [Estabrook Learning Community](#), 1555 West Cross St. in Ypsi, recently joined forces with [826michigan](#) to produce *In the Clouds Over Ypsilanti: Community Superhero Stories*. The book features students' original stories of fictional superheroes who call Ypsi home, interviews with real-life "superheroes" who live and work in Ypsi, and reflections on what it truly means to be a hero in the community.

826michigan executive director Naimah Wade believes the superhero theme aligns with 826michigan's mission of inspiring kids ages 6 to 18 to "use their voice and to write confidently and skillfully." The southeast Michigan-based nonprofit is one of eight [826 National](#) chapters across the country.

"We believe that writing is a transformative discovery process that allows our students to feel confident and express themselves in ways that position them to make a great impact in the future," Wade says.

After participating in the [Hero Nation comic con](#) on Sept. 9 at Parkridge Community Center, 826michigan staff decided to base their next [Young Authors Book Project](#) on the theme of local superheroes. Every year 826michigan staff work with a different school in Ypsi, Ann Arbor, or Detroit to write and revise stories to be featured in a professionally printed book.



*Book designer Ingrid Ankerson, student Keymani Barfield, illustrator Jermaine Dickerson, and students Lilo Gatzke and TaNiyah Lockley unveil the books. **Photo by Nicole Haley***



*Student writer TaNiyah Lockley speaks at the book release party, as Keymani Barfield and Lilo Gatzke look on.
Photo by Nicole Haley*

"We were really inspired by the Hero Nation event and the idea that there are superheroes in our own community and real-life people can be superheroes," says 826michigan program coordinator Megan Gilson. "Really everyone has superhero qualities within them, and everyone in the community is a superhero."

Throughout the school year, students and 826michigan volunteers explored what it really means to be a superhero. They started off by identifying basic superhero qualities, like wearing a cape and helping people, and then worked on expanding their definition of what it means to be a superhero by digging deeper into existing fictional stories, generating their own ideas, and meeting real-life community leaders in Ypsi.

"Everyone grew in their understanding of what it meant to be a superhero and how we all have the ability to be superheroes," Gilson says.

Wade believes the superhero theme helped "close the gap on what students think is real and imaginary in terms of what a hero can actually do." She says it helped students understand that superheroes don't need to have supernatural abilities; they can be normal people who do practical things for their community. She thinks the theme helped students realize that they have superhero qualities too.

"To have students be able to articulate that themselves and to find that realization themselves was really powerful," Wade says.

Gray agreed to involve her students in the Young Authors Book Project because she wanted them to improve their writing and editing skills and build their writing stamina. Students often write something and never revisit it, so she thought it would be helpful for them to better understand the entire writing process, especially the benefit of undergoing numerous revisions.

"Their writing became wonderful," Gray says. "They really got into it and I think the excitement over the fact that they were able to publish this story and interview these people and go through



826michigan Program Coordinator Megan Gilson and Executive Director Naimah Wade
Photo by Doug Coombe

the whole process ignited their love of writing, where they felt like, 'I can accomplish this,' instead of, 'Oh my God, I don't want to write again.'"

In the fall, volunteers with 826michigan came into Gray's classroom once or twice a week during their regularly scheduled English Language Arts class to help students with their fictional superhero stories. The students dreamed up superheroes who represent themselves and other members of their community, created storylines set in various locations around Ypsi, and then continued to develop their stories over the course of several months.

TaNiyah Lockley, 11, wrote a story titled "Janae in First Place!" about a teenage girl who discovers that her dancing abilities give her superpowers. TaNiyah loosely based her superhero, Janae Howard, off of herself because they both love to dance and want to use dance to help people.

Lilo Gatzke's story, "Water Tower Terror," follows Unigirl and her sidekick, Power Pup, as they try to fix the Ypsi water tower after it's destroyed by the evil genius Dr. Horse. Lilo, 11, decided to create a unicorn superhero because she loves unicorns. She chose to feature the water tower because her grandparents live near it.



Estabrook Learning Community sixth-grade teacher Jennifer Gray. Photo by Doug Coombe

During the winter, the students and volunteers identified real-life superheroes in the community. They ultimately decided to invite six community leaders into the classroom for interviews: local artist Yen Azzaro, Ypsi-based graphic designer and [Hero Nation](#) founder Jermaine Dickerson,

[Ypsilanti Community Schools](#) superintendent Ben Edmondson, lifelong resident and [The Fuller Cut](#) barber shop owner Alex Fuller, farmer and [We the People Growers Association](#) founder Melvin Parson, and community activist Desirae Simmons. The students generated their own questions to ask the community members about their superhero qualities and how they overcome challenges like a superhero. Afterwards, each student wrote a reflection based on a particular interview with a real-life superhero.

Lilo liked interviewing the real-life superheroes because she got to learn about people who contribute to the community in different ways. She says the experience caused her to realize she can make a difference too. She hopes to contribute to her community by helping to clean up Ypsi by doing things like picking up garbage.

"Not just fictional characters, like Superman and Batman, can be superheroes," Lilo says. "Real people can too."



*Lilo Gatzke holds a copy of *In the Clouds Over Ypsilanti*. Photo by Nicole Haley*

When the students finished writing and editing in March, all of the text was turned over to professionals, who created the tangible book. Dickerson, one of the class' real-life superheroes, created the book's cover illustration and wrote the foreword, and Ann Arbor-based graphic designer Ingrid Ankerson designed the book.

A volunteer-based student editorial board, which formed in the winter to help edit stories, continued to work throughout the spring. The editorial board wrote the introduction for the book, with a special dedication to Gray, and planned a book release event.

TaNiyah and Lilo both opted to join the student editorial board because they enjoy writing and editing. They say writing is a great outlet for them because it allows them to be creative and express themselves.

"My experience working on In the Clouds Over Ypsilanti was a lot of hard work and it was a long experience, but it was worth it," TaNiyah says.

On June 5, a book release event was held in the school's library. Dressed as superheroes, the students saw the finished product for the first time when a piece of fabric was lifted to reveal a big stack of the books. Each student got to bring a book home, and some of the students and real-life superheroes signed books for each other and others who attended the event.

"When I saw the book for the first time, it felt very relieving that the stories that I made and my classmates made came in one book," TaNiyah says. "It's a memory for all of us to keep."

The book can be purchased for \$15 [online](#) or at either of 826michigan's retail stores: Liberty Street Robot Supply and Repair, 115 E. Liberty St. in Ann Arbor; or Detroit Robot Factory, 1351 Winder St. in Detroit's Eastern Market. Proceeds from the book's sales directly benefit 826michigan's free programs for school-aged children.



Student writers Viktor Buhnerkemper, Anthony Ponder, Cam'ron Odom, Hailey Jackson, Unique Barne, Lilo Gatzke, and Keymani Barfield at the book release event. Photo by Nicole Haley



*Wyatt Collins (in focus) at the book release party. A line from his story inspired the title of *In the Clouds Over Ypsilanti*. Photo by Nicole Haley*

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Book release event photos by [Nicole Haley](#). All other photos by [Doug Coombe](#).