

Features

MASTERMIND: Chalk Talk With D'Real Graham

TANYA MUZUMDAR | WEDNESDAY, MARCH 20, 2013



D'REAL GRAHAM AT 826MICHIGAN IN ANN ARBOR - DOUG COOMBE

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What would the public educational system look like if, as a rule, each school board had a member who had graduated from a high school within the district during the last 10 years? Would education be more relevant to today's youth? That could very well be.

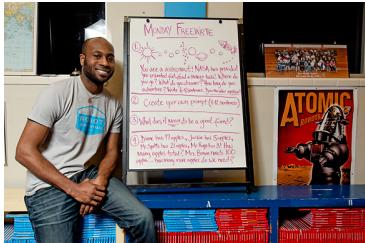
Last year, at age 25, D'Real Graham ran for the board of Ypsilanti Public Schools. While he did not land a seat, Graham, who is also a commissioner on the city of [Ypsilanti's Recreation Commission](#), still plays prominently in the city's educational domain.

After graduating from Ypsilanti High School in 2005, he attended Eastern Michigan University and Washtenaw Community College. He now serves as the program coordinator for [826 Michigan](#), a nonprofit creative and expository writing programming for high-school and elementary-age students. Graham orchestrates the after-school writing program at Ypsilanti Middle School and the drop-in writing workshops at the Ypsilanti District Library. Much of his job entails recruiting, training, and retaining volunteers to help with tutoring. Prior to that, he taught pre-school for [Bright Horizons](#), a childcare and early education provider for large employers.

"We had high-caliber students so we implemented a lesson plan. We tried to make sure the students were meeting basic criteria so their transition to Kindergarten would be easy," Graham says. "I had fun teaching them about gravity, making sure they were familiar with their alphabet and able to



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exercise their fine motor skills so they can flip pages in a book and write their favorite words and draw their favorite pictures."

Graham has also taught science at the [Ann Arbor Hands On Museum](#), running the gamut from the water cycle to the three states of matter, light and optics, and magnetics.

Concentrate's Tanya Muzumdar gets the rundown on vita and vitality from Graham.

What did you study in college?

At Eastern Michigan I focused on business management, and at Washtenaw Community College I concentrated on elementary education. Once I took an accounting class I realized I wasn't really passionate about the business field and I discovered that I enjoyed empowering youth. I participated in a play that was called *The Colored Museum* while I was a student at EMU. It was sponsored by EMU's theatrical department. I was also recruited by Wallace Bridges and I performed in a play that worked hands-on with Community High School [in Baldwin, Mich.].

After that play, the students were looking at me like I was Will Smith. And that was my first time acting. I was like 'Wow!' If I can inspire these young adults to continue to pursue their dreams then maybe I should consider teaching or advocating education, so I started working at the Ann Arbor Hands-On Museum in the fall of 2007. I taught science for two years and then after that I began working in early childhood education at the University of Michigan Towsley Center.

Do you have a yen for the stage?

I wouldn't mind auditioning for the right part, or just to try but at the moment, no, I'm not seeking to be on stage any time soon. That experience showed me I can work with people of different backgrounds, I can be sociable, I can actually memorize a script. So I tried to take the skills acquired from that and apply it in my everyday life.

You're a lifelong Ypsi resident who has seen the city from all angles – residential, educational and governmental. What do you like most about the city?

I enjoy how small Ypsi is. The opportunity to be able to sit next to a city councilman at Beezy's informally, and being able to communicate and express yourself confidently, knowing that your input is invaluable. I think a lot of people are unaware of the resources here, so I try to invest my time in sharing those resources and Ypsi as a community is very creative, very innovative.

How easy is it get involved in Ypsi at a relatively young age?

I think a lot of residents here who are established are seeking young adults to fulfill roles of importance – to be on commissions, to be on certain committees, to serve on boards. They're eager to recruit EMU graduates or EMU students to be involved. It's very accessible to get your hands into anything that's going on in the community.



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What got you onto the Ypsi school board ballot and what platform did you run on?

I was encouraged by one of my mentors to run, actually. It wasn't on my radar. I just took the confidence and ran with it. It gave me an opportunity to be a part of conversations and to internalize what's important to our residents in regards to K-12 formal education...to hear so many people enthusiastically vocal about not just giving our students diplomas, but skill sets that can better Ypsilanti really inspired me.

I was very informal, honestly, during the process. I just wanted to physically be wherever necessary to champion Ypsilanti and to advocate the good that is here and to listen to our residents. My platform was just "I'm what Ypsilanti has produced" and I want to continue to help other youth in our area to be a part of our community in ways they may not have known were available for them.

What was the takeaway from your experience of running?

I was overwhelmed with the support, actually. Nine-thousand people voted for me on November 6. From the voting it was apparent they wanted someone who has gone through the school system to actually represent them. And I'm motivated to run again in the next election, being that in the next election, whoever is voted in will actually be able to take a seat in the fall. Because of the consolidation, the board was appointed by the Washtenaw Intermediate School District, so that changed how the board was structured.

I didn't take the route of yard signs and stickers or a website. I went on the word of mouth of my supporters, of parents, and my peers and I think a lot of people recognized my name from my involvement thus far, so they realized that marking for D'Real Graham meant that someone is going to actually care.

How did you land on the Ypsilanti Recreation Commission?

I was a member of the Ypsi Area Jaycees in 2010 so I was very active in community organizing and facilitating local events, and I was a part of the committee who brought the Kelly Miller Circus to the Partridge Park on the south side of Ypsi. And just being a part of that, I reacquainted myself with the park and I got the attention of Paul Schreiber, our mayor, and he thought I would be an asset to the community by serving on the commission. So he appointed me in the fall of 2010.

I just recently transitioned from chairman to a regular commissioner, which is awesome. So as a commissioner, I made sure community forums were available so a community voice was included in the decision-making in regards to the capital tax that was implemented last year. If folks weren't able to attend a city council meeting, we tried to visit the information that was articulated in regards to parks and rec. I was also instrumental with communicating or impressing the idea of placing a recreation center on Water Street to mirror the one that's across from Whole Foods on Washtenaw, the Meri Lou Murray Recreation Center.

Are you seeking reappointment?

My term expires this summer. I'm actually interested in either serving on the human relations commission for the city of Ypsi or the housing commission.

So in terms of community involvement, what do you see as the most pressing areas for young adults to get involved in?

Just embracing what we have here and mobilizing our residents and leaders to engage in what is available, instead of forming micro-groups, to actually invest in spending time on our commissions and serving on advisory boards, especially in regards to the consolidation. People want the residents involved. When I say people, those who are serving currently in roles like superintendent or current board members, they really want their residents to show up to board meetings and to complete questionnaires.

Currently I'm on the advisory group for early childhood education, the advisory group that is preparing documents of the community voice to submit to the appointed board and the decision-making for the July 1 merger [between Willow Run Community Schools and Ypsilanti Public Schools]. I'm also part of the co-curricular advisory, so we're making sure that the vision for early childhood co-curricular aligns with the residents.

What do you do in your leisure time?

I consider being on the advisory committees and volunteering as much as possible as a great way to invest my leisure, but other than that I just enjoy spending time with my peers and spending time with my cohorts outside of the wrk environment are fluid and comprehensive. I enjoy running 5Ks and 10Ks. I enjoy art a lot. I visit museums and I try to sketch as much as possible [nature and still life].

Where do you see yourself in five years?

I'm deeply rooted in Ypsilanti, so I don't have aspirations to leave anytime soon. I just hope in the next five years to have completed my undergrad studies... I think having a degree doesn't dictate your involvement in this community, however I think it is very important to set precedent and to set an example for my middle schoolers.

Tell us about your mentors and what drives your work.

I would consider Amy Sumerton, the program director of 826Michigan, as a huge influence in my life currently. Also, Anne Brown; she is a commissioner of the parks and rec commission as well. She makes sure that I'm informed about any meeting that is happening. I have a loyal friend, my best friend since we were in middle school actually. Kyle Hunt ensures that I'm never alone and he's always someone that I can speak to in confidence, which I appreciate. Lastly, I couldn't consider anyone my mentor without mentioning my mother, Tanya Graham. She impressed the idea of being constructive with my time as a very young child, like elementary age and using my time wisely and never to burn a bridge and really valuing others.

It's for Ypsilanti, it's for our children. It's for the next generation, so to speak. That brings me joy; that's the reason why I rest well at night and never feel pressed for time and nothing to me is urgent. I understand everything takes time.

Tanya Muzumdar is a freelance writer and the Assistant Editor of Concentrate and [Metromode](#). Her last feature column was "[Encyclopedia Barera.](#)" She also writes poetry. Her work is forthcoming in Dunes Review.

All photos by [Doug Coombe](#)