

March Feature: Catherine Calabro Cavin

Catherine Calabro Cavin, 826michigan's director of education, has spent more than a decade creating spaces for young writers to use their imaginations and curiosities. In fact, much of her life has been focused on giving students access to writing and writing experiences.

Connecting with young people has been a part of Catherine's entire teenage and adult life. In high school she served as a Girl Scouts camp counselor. (Catherine, unsurprisingly, is a lifelong Girl Scout.) While earning her bachelor's degree at DePaw University, she helped organize and run creative arts summer camps and mentored a young person through a youth mentorship program.

Before starting a master of fine arts (MFA) program at the University of Michigan (U-M), she worked with the YMCA and the Dayton International Peace Museum. After completing her MFA program, she came back to working with youth.

"While I was a graduate student at U-M I was trying to figure out a way to work with and volunteer with young people because I was in the university and I was only working with university-aged people," Catherine says. "I was connected with 826michigan, which at the time was still a pretty young non-profit."

Catherine volunteered with 826michigan for two years, interned for another year, and then became a staff member. As the director of education, she oversees the structure and content of programs and the staff who run the programs. In addition to creating strong program content, she also supports meaningful volunteer trainings. Catherine says she writes in many different genres including lesson plans, proposals for projects, grant writing, organizational policies, and emails.

"One of my favorite things to think about is genre, audience, and purpose," she says. "When a student or I am stuck, just thinking about who I'm writing it for and how to appeal to that audience really helps me to figure things out. That's something that's been a really powerful tool for me to use. I came to know that writing is how I understand [...] my own thinking [and that] has been pretty transformative."

Her love of supporting young people and their writing endeavors, perhaps, stems from her own writing experiences as a child. While earning a Girl Scouts writing badge as a nine year old, she realized writing was something she could do on her own to feel happy.

"I was really nerdy all through middle school and high school," Catherine says. "I think reading funny books helped me feel like I wasn't alone. I could be nerdy and goofy. Writing funny things [also helped me feel like I could be myself]."

Catherine's discovery of the power of her imagination and writing led to a desire to always be writing or using writing. Beyond using writing for herself, she hopes her work with 826michigan will offer young people the same access to writing she had when she was younger.

"It has always been important to me that students find a way to be a little less lonely through writing," Catherine says. "That students have the opportunity to access writing in a way that's freeing and expressive and in a way that draws on their already strong imaginations and strong curiosities."

Catherine is now embarking on a new journey as a doctoral student in Eastern Michigan University's education studies program. Her work includes an "exciting" partnership between the College of Education and Ypsilanti Community Schools in which preservice teachers work in Ypsilanti's elementary schools. She is in an evaluator role, meaning she is focused on improving the program for future years.

Tying all of Catherine's current and past experiences together is the belief that "writing allows us to use our power in different ways."

"If writing is a tool that can allow us to [communicate an important message and connect with an audience], I wouldn't want any young person to not be equipped with it," Catherine says.

Information About 826michigan

826michigan brings volunteers and young people together to collaborate on writing projects. The non-profit offers free tutoring, creative writing field trips, in-school writing projects, creative writing workshops, and publication opportunities in Ann Arbor, Ypsilanti, and Detroit. "We would love to have people who would be interested in volunteering. You don't have to be someone who identifies as a writer. You just have to be a person who cares about connecting in the community. We all learn together," Catherine says.

826michigan collaborates with Eastern Michigan University's Office of Campus and Community Writing to provide writing support through YpsiWrites, a free writing center housed at the Ypsilanti District Libraries.

For more information about 826michigan's services and volunteer opportunities, visit www.826michigan.org. Connect with 826michigan on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram to stay up-to-date on the organization's happenings.