

Get Creative in a Makerspace!

By Melodee Pedersen

While anticipation continues to build about the proposed new Library/Cultural Arts Center, an oft-heard question about one area of the new building's design is, "What is a makerspace?" I have to admit, this is an area that my family and I are particularly excited about. Makerspaces are an exploding trend in libraries. All across the country, interest in doing things yourself is growing, as evidenced by the popularity of Pinterest and do-it-yourself television programming. Makerspaces can provide opportunities to learn old-school skills like sewing and soldering or how to use new technology like 3D printers or laser cutters. The bottom line is that a makerspace is a place where people can come together to create something. The neat thing about makerspaces is that they can be tailored to our community's needs and interests.

Let me give you some examples of how people in other communities have used their libraries' makerspaces. In several cities across the country, 3D printers in libraries have been used to print prosthetic hands or arms for children. Riverside, California's makerspace has a recording studio. Will the next "Call Me Maybe" come out of Riverside? It's possible! The Westport, Connecticut public library has a patron that is using their makerspace to build large wooden model airplanes. Other creations are coat racks made of dinosaur figures, art projects, iphone speakers, robots and more.

Makerspaces can also save people money. Say a small part breaks on your dishwasher. Instead of sending away for that small part, or more likely, a larger assembly, you could make your own replacement part with a 3D printer. Omaha now has the "Do Space", a huge makerspace funded by some of Omaha's leading philanthropists. On a recent visit there, I chatted with a young woman using the laser cutter to create her own wedding invitations. She said she was able to make them herself at about a fourth of the cost of buying them.

This concept of providing technology and tools that people couldn't easily afford on their own to the public has even developed into a business. Five years ago, Jim Newton, of Menlo Park, California opened TechShop, basically a makerspace on steroids that offers access to hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of tools like sand-blasting cabinets, milling machines, expensive software and more. He now has four other locations and plans on opening twenty more over the next three years. Some of the success stories that have come from his business are Dodocase, makers of one of the most popular ipad, iphone and Kindle covers; the Lightning Motorcycle, which can tow a boat or trailer up to a thousand pounds; and Square, an electronic payment device that allows users to accept credit card payments with their mobile device. I have even seen these in action at the state fair.

In these days when technology tends to isolate us, it is encouraging to dream about a space that will bring people together and be a hotbed of creativity. What will you use the new makerspace for?