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EDITOR'S PICK FEATURED

Creating spaces for imagination, innovation

BY STEPHANIE BRZEZINSKI sbrzezinski@record-eagle.com 14 hrs ago



Record-Eagle/Tessa Lighty

From left to right, Helen Dewey, Amanda McLaren and Kate Easlick learn about a game during Making and Learning, a three-day makers workshop at Benzonina Public Library.

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TRAVERSE CITY — Benzonia Public Library Director Amanda McLaren said she first got involved with the maker movement through her husband, who likes to tinker, and her son, who loves science.

“What really draws me to the maker movement is the community aspect,” McLaren said. “It opens doors for those that are talented, creative, artistic and curious and brings together a community of like-minded people.”

And the community is growing on several regional fronts.

The Benzonia Public Library hosted free workshops and a MakerFest earlier this week, and the Fife Lake Makerspace is fundraising for a physical space. Traverse City Area Public Schools Elementary Materials Coordinator Shelly VanderMeulen led a session called “Makerspaces: Play and Learn Time” during the Wired TC Summer Conference on Monday.

The concept of “maker culture” is where hacker culture, DIY-ability and technology intersect. The national movement combines varied pursuits like traditional arts and crafts and engineering with an open-source philosophy and a playful, collaborative spirit.

Proponents say it is less about a newly-minted label than re-connecting with qualities like self-reliance and tinkering, which often go unused in modern culture.

“It encompasses everything,” McLaren said. “I feel like it comes from that desire to reconnect with basics and building something you can be proud of. I feel like we’ve lost that.”

Teresa Mills, of Fife Lake, said she first heard about makerspaces in 2012, when she got involved as a facilitator for the movement throughout Grand Traverse County.

“It’s like a gym, but it’s for the mind,” Mills said. “A maker is everything from baking cookies to installing to journalism — people need to quit getting caught up in the ‘makerspace’ label.”

Her work with the Fife Lake Makerspace focuses on fundraising for a physical space. She said a Grand Rapids-based developer has offered to build it and many people are ready to donate tools and labor to the project.

“There’s a need for this up here,” Mills said. “A makerspace would give everybody who comes up here a place. It would boost commerce, supply tools and materials. It’s a win-win for any community.”

The Fife Lake Makerspace also includes a 4-H Makerspace Club. Mills said this group is important because school districts are losing money, and the Michigan State University Extension considers Forest Area one of the most underserved districts.

“That allows us to start teaching kids,” Mills said. “We hit every generation. It’s family oriented; it’s educational.”

Mills said the maker movement is widespread, with the annual National Week of Making and White House Maker Faire created by President Obama in 2014. Cities like Grand Rapids and Detroit have hosted these events, and a grant from the University of Michigan’s School of Information and the Institute of Museum and Library Services allowed the Benzonia Public library to host free workshops and a MakerFest earlier this week.

The events overlapped with the library’s summer-long science, technology, engineering, arts and mathematics (STEAM) theme.

McLaren added that she was excited that the small town hosted a “big city” event.

“The real focus is on starting this with youth,” McLaren said. “This also offers continuing education credits for teachers.”

Makerspaces can change the relationship between teachers and students, but VanderMeulen said this is a good thing because it creates positive learning experiences.

“It’s a shift from traditional education,” she said. “The teacher doesn’t have to be the expert; they’re much more of a coach. Kids get engaged and pick out the things they’re excited about.”

They use new materials and create kits to inspire elementary school children, from new techy gadgets to something as simple as measuring cups, VanderMeulen said.

She noted the difference in how people approached the table of toys and other items.

“The kids immediately picked something up and started playing with it,” she said. “It takes adults longer to learn. We somehow lose that play factor.”

(A makerspace) the goal is to play, explore, build and try it. It's also a place to fail.”

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