FOSTERING BUSINESS IN TACOMA

HOW TACOMA'S SPACEWORKS WORKS

BY KAYLA SCHROEDER / PHOTOS BY RACHEL COWARD

RR and Darcy Anderson shared a dream. The Tacoma couple’s desire to start a creative reuse art center had them returning again and again to the drawing board, but artist salaries and startup costs built a daunting wall between these two and their entrepreneurial concept. That was until Tacoma Spaceworks stepped in, waved a networking wand and made a dream come true.

The Spaceworks movement is in its fourth year, acting as a building block for local artwork and budding business. Amy McBride, arts administrator at City of Tacoma, first saw the vacancies plaguing the downtown quadrant and pushed to fill them with creative talent. With help from the city and the Tacoma-Pierce County Chamber of Commerce, it piggybacked off similar movements across the country and introduced Spaceworks to South Sound.

The Spaceworks community coalition pulls from a pool of hand-selected and trained candidates. Applicants submit their proposals each fall. In 2014, 23 out of 30 submissions were accepted into the program. Professional development training kicks off at the turn of the year as the prospective business owners complete 21 hours of course material, including business management and marketing skills. Then they wait. RR and Darcy Anderson waited several months, and others may wait years. Space is the biggest dilemma, according to Heather Joy, Spaceworks manager, who oversees the long list of hopefuls.

Last summer the Andersons proudly celebrated the first birthday of Tinkertopia, their cartoon-themed creation shop. Within the eccentric junk store, bins upon bins spill over with trinkets — retired wine corks, forsaken puzzle pieces, metal scraps, fabric samples and other odds and ends. “The weirder, the better,” RR says. These donated materials are sold for pocket change as lightly-used art supplies, when they may otherwise have piled up in a landfill.

“It’s amazing how much waste the consumer culture generates,” RR says. He and his wife consider their collection an eye-opening educational experience on waste reduction, with an emphasis on early childhood learning, thanks to Tinkertime and summer camp workshops offered with know-how from Darcy’s teaching background. They hope visitors will see the shop as a playhouse where all ages are welcome to “open the creative valves.” The business concept is community supported, environmentally friendly, self-sustaining, innovative and founded with determination and 

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enthusiasm — a prime recipe for a Spaceworks success story.

Spaceworks-supported projects span three categories: "Creative Enterprises" for full-fledged business initiatives like retail shops and gallery exhibitions; "Artist Residencies" for practicing performing and visual artists and "ArtsCapes" for art installations integrated as streetside displays and murals. Together with local support and funding, Spaceworks is successfully tailoring Tacoma into a lively network of quirky shops and galleries, reeling in more tourism and enhancing downtown vitality.

Vacant spaces are donated by property owners for a window of up to six months, during which time they agree to accept $1 monthly rent from Creative Enterprise and Art Residency participants in exchange for covered utility costs and a more visually appealing, trafficked property. The real estate remains listed until a lease is signed, which is — more often than not — a result of the program. After six months, prosperous Spaceworks projects like Tinkertopia transition to standard rent and long-term leases.

"We like our urban setting, under the umbrella of the city," RR says of his envied address at the front lines of University of the Washington Tacoma campus. "It really suits our environmental message."

Joy has been leading the program for a year and half and says, "Spaceworks' stamp gives participants validity as future renters." She says the organization has fostered the success of more than 150 local businesses and art projects during its lifetime.

For Justin Kercher, all the components seemed to fall into place. After two years of establishing his clothing company online, Spaceworks opened the door to Do The Extraordinary (DTE) on the popular Pacific Avenue stretch. Thanks to good fortune and the fact that Kercher had already locked permits and licensing, he was considered a senior within the program, and the opportunity for space was almost immediate. The Cutters Point vacancy was donated by the UW-T which had recognized the benefits of the program after teaming with Tinkertopia.

Kercher acknowledges the unfortunate trend of dying businesses in the area, but is convinced that DTE will not fail.

"It seems like everyone wants to start a clothing company and screen-print T-shirts, expecting to be successful," Kercher says. "But you're just another voice in a huge crowd of noise. You have to differentiate yourself somehow, whether that's by your message or by"
your product. That's what we're trying to do here, to provide something you're not going to find anywhere else."

The Northwest vibe of Kercher's high-end brand fills the once-dead windows with fashion-forward fall layering pieces. Each article of clothing and piece of jewelry is handmade by his team of close friends and relatives. It's a family affair at this shop — family that is now an honored part of the growing Spaceworks community.

Clustering businesses seems to be a smart technique for the steering team, as are its hopes that DTE will mimic Tinkertopia's success.

While Spaceworks currently resides downtown, the evolution of the program will likely spread its wings into other parts of the city, that is, if they can coordinate enough retail space to ensure prosperity. Ruston Way is next on the map and with the massive amount of imagination driving the program, the possibilities are endless.

Check out the full map of Spaceworks projects online at spaceworkstacoma.com/about/spaceworks-map/ or pick up the brochure at the Woolworth Gallery, located at 955 Broadway, Tacoma.

JOIN THE MOVEMENT

If you have unused real estate you would like to offer to the Spaceworks program, contact Heather Joy, Spaceworks Manager 253-683-1722 heatherj@tacomachamber.org

If you would like to submit a Spaceworks application, learn more online at spaceworkstacoma.com/about/

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