

Intergenerationally Accessible Makerspaces

How Carroll County Public Library's Exploration Commons Serves Our Local Senior Population

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INTRODUCTION

There is a great deal of shared DNA between libraries and makerspaces. Both spaces provide classes and programs which serve to educate the community and offer the public access to resources that can greatly enhance or refresh their skillsets. These spaces also serve as perfect venues for learning. It might seem that the only difference lies in the nature of the resources being provided. Libraries typically provide access to books and other forms of physical media, while makerspaces primarily offer access to technical equipment and software.

However, the most notable perceived difference between libraries and makerspaces is how accessible these locations are for certain demographic groups. Specifically, there is a presumption of the demographics which frequent these locations. Makerspaces are commonly expected to host a younger demographic, while libraries are thought of as a space mostly visited by older generations. We are all aware that the latter stereotype is far from correct; however not every library has a close association with a local makerspace.

As for Carroll County Public Library, one of our locations itself is a makerspace: the [Exploration Commons](#) facility located at 50 East Main Street, Westminster, Maryland. Rather than the demographic of the customers skewing toward a younger audience, we have found that our makerspace is enjoyed across all generations. In fact, we have found that the customers who most take advantage of the tools and programs supplied by Exploration Commons, in ways we had not anticipated, are seniors.

EXPLORATION COMMONS AT A GLANCE

Exploration Commons boasts a suite of equipment, workspaces, software, and events, all supported by a highly trained staff who welcome each individual, making them comfortable, and engaging them in learning from their first visit. This combination of equipment and individualized instruction greatly bolsters Carroll County Public Library's mission to supply our community with opportunities for lifelong learning through impactful programs, resources, and services. Construction on the 13,618 square foot facility (see Figure 1) was completed in December 2021, with the space integrating a makerspace, a professional teaching kitchen, a classroom, and three meeting rooms. Available equipment includes laser engravers, 3D printers, an Audio-Visual Lab, a 3D scanner, and several sewing machines, along with many others. In fiscal year 2024, Exploration Commons had 33,360 visits, offered more than 600 educational programs with a cumulative attendance of over 6,700 individuals, and issued 355 certifications for customers to independently use equipment.

About the Authors

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Figure 1. Exploration Commons

The space is built and operated in ways that allow every person who walks through our doors to not only consume information and have access to equipment, but to create, contribute to their communities, learn new skills, or begin a new career. This is accomplished through introductory programs oriented towards specific age groups, classes dedicated to working alongside individuals with greater proficiency with the available equipment, and a dedicated staff who understand how to work with customers of varying levels of experience and of various ages.

Thanks to these practices, not only were younger generations frequenting Exploration Commons to learn new skills and work on personal projects, but members of our senior community came to find their local makerspace as a comfortable and inviting place to learn and apply their skills. One of the most notable members of this community of older makerspace users is Dave Hall (see Figure 2).

Dave was a member of the Volunteers for Medical Engineering who work in partnership with The IMAGE Center of Maryland. The latter group works with people with disabilities to give them a greater degree of personal independence. Alongside his fellow volunteers and students from various Maryland universities, Dave Hall uses the 3D printers at Exploration Commons to create specially tailored engineering solutions for those with physical disabilities.

Figure 2. Dave Hall and a 3D printer.

Dave displayed an example of one of his projects at the 2023 Maker Expo, involving a man named Gary, a farmer in Carroll County who lost his right hand, but who still wanted to keep farming. Dave and a team of other volunteers worked with him and developed assistive devices that enabled Gary to much more effectively operate his farm equipment. One example was a special prosthetic attachment that allows him to drive his tractor. This was accomplished by using the 3D printers at Exploration Commons. When asked how he thought his work would be affected if he had not had access to Exploration Commons, Dave said,

Oh, it would be much more difficult. I would have access to the 3D printers at, for instance, University of Maryland and UMBC and other places. But of course, they're in high demand. Then I'd probably have to go there, which is an hour drive, and try to get things printed. It could be done, but it would make it much more difficult. I really appreciate Exploration Commons, and I appreciate Carroll County, and in fact all the counties in Maryland who are looking ahead and saying we need to develop this technology and make it available. We need to get more people involved in the libraries and the things that are available. Exploration Commons to me just seems like a natural extension of the library.

Dave is a very technologically literate senior who has been able to apply and enhance skills he has built up over his lifetime, thanks to having an outlet in the form of a local makerspace. But there are also customers who directly apply their skills to teach others through volunteering at this makerspace. A great example of such a person is Robin Lunger (see Figure 3).

Robin is a lifelong sewer who applied skills, skills she began cultivating at age 9, many times throughout her nursing career. She continues to refine those same skills in her retirement. Before Exploration Commons was open to the public, Robin spent 10 years searching for a local makerspace.

Robin quickly recognized that Exploration Commons offered her the potential to expand her skills with the new technologies and programs, and she embraced the opportunity in full stride. She learned to use new sewing machines and additional tools like Adobe Illustrator and laser cutters. Her time spent utilizing Exploration Commons for her own projects evolved into the role of a volunteer educator for her community, sharing her skills with others.

Figure 3. Robin Lunger showing samples of her work.



Carroll County Public Library Marketing Coordinator, Arielle Baquol, interviewed Robin. When speaking with Robin about her experience with our makerspace, Arielle asked how Robin had benefited from blending new technology with her existing skill set.

I personally have benefited significantly because I really wanted to understand how clothing was manufactured. Fiber arts were always something I was very interested in. Being here has allowed me to break down everything that I teach to its basic elements and execute it cleaner, faster, and easier. I can sit down at a computer and get entire lines done in one day, instead of the old time-consuming process of tracing and retracing.

For Robin, the technology available at Exploration Commons allowed her to naturally build upon her skills in ways she was previously unable to, which in turn unlocked whole new ways for her to learn and became whole new ways for her to teach. Robin now serves a critical role in making this makerspace one that is even more accessible to seniors thanks to her own experience and skills.

A SPACE WHERE SENIORS CAN THRIVE

In the cases of Dave and Robin, two exceptional individuals are applying their many years of experience in novel ways to give back to the community. However, these two are by no means outliers when it comes to members of the community who frequent this location.

Exploration Commons regularly hosts programs designed to help ease seniors into learning how to operate the equipment available in this makerspace. Typically, these introductory programs result in the creation of physical designs and digital item files, which then helps nudge participants toward returning to the makerspace either for more programs, or on their own to continue building upon the skills cultivated there. These programs serve as basic tutorials for learning unfamiliar technologies in an environment wherein mistakes are treated as further opportunities to learn, and where participants know they are working alongside kind and likeminded creators in the making.

This has resulted in a great number of returning customers from our local senior community, ones who share their knowledge with customers from younger generations and participate in events where they can display the fruits of their labors. Thanks to the dedication of our Exploration Commons staff for aligning with Carroll County Public Library's mission to provide lifelong learning to our whole community, this library funded makerspace has become a space of shared learning that not only welcomes all ages but supports them along their lifelong learning journey.