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CAMP GUIDE

Tools to unlock the imagination

Kinesthetic learners are drawn to Leonardo's Basement

SHEILA REGAN

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The rules at Leonardo's Basement are simple, said Executive Director Steve Jevning: "Be safe, be nice and have fun."

Leonardo's Basement has hot glue guns, saws, hammers and drills, but what they don't have is a whole lot of tool instruction when kids and teens walk through the door.

"We start with an assumption that kids don't want to hurt themselves," said Executive Director Steve Jevning, who founded the organization over 20 years ago with a group of parents from Barton Open School. "Our job is to create an environment to be creative but not out of control.

"Our rules about behavior are, 'Be safe, be nice and have fun.' That covers every imaginable situation."

Located in the Windom neighborhood, Leonardo's Basement offers classes, camps and workshops for kinesthetic learners who like to work with their hands. Kids and teens use their creativity for engineering, technology and arts and crafts projects where they get to make whatever they dream up.

Working at their own pace, the youth make choices of what materials to use and are given freedom to decide how to complete their projects.



Summer workshops at Leonardo's Basement are open to youth ages 6–17. Submitted photo

Teaching responsibility

When young people walk through the door, they are given examples of what not being safe is, like running or not being careful with a tool. They are told to be nice and respectful. There's a two-strikes-and-you're-out policy for kids that can't be responsible.

But if a kid shows up already knowing how to use a utility knife, they don't have to learn the basics from the beginning. "The OSHA [Occupational Safety and Health Administration] people would be terrified," Jevning said. "We don't waste kids' time on how to properly use a hammer or drill or hot gun because of the range of experiences these kids have.

Instead, if a young person has a question, they simply ask and learn individually what they need to know in order to use the tools for their project.

"That's worked out fine for 20 years," Jevning said. "People that come in that are all about the safety freak out, but they also aren't educators."

Jevning himself was a teacher trained in open education, a philosophy based notions of exploration, independent learning and collaboration. In the 1990s, his son, who attended Barton Open School, was part of group of about a dozen kids interested in science, and they formed an after-school club for field trips and projects.

After a year or two, the club became an organized school program. There was so much interest that they eventually they started hosting a summer workshop, and that workshop led to Leonardo's Basement.



The world of Harry Potter

Each summer, Leonardo's Basement offers over 100 different classes in woodworking, metalworking, robotics, electronics, Legos, animation and all sorts of different kinds of crafts, like sewing or making floats. They also offer theme weeks, like this summer's Harry Potter week.

For the theme weeks, families and friends are invited to come on

Saturday after the camp to experience the world the campers created. After the Harry Potter-themed week, for example, visitors walk through Diagon Alley, play with wands and check out the potions and Quidditch paraphernalia like brooms and snitches the young people have created.

This year, Jevning said they plan to offer butter beer.

"It's a two-fold thing," he said. "It's a bigger deal celebration for the kids who have built everything they can share with their siblings and family members, and it's a good promotional item. We're not a museum with public hours, so it's hard for people to come and see the place to pop in."

Even during theme weeks, Leonardo's Basement always offer an alternative for kids who want to try something else, like designing a board game, making costumes or taking a puzzle room class.

"It's a way to have a choice that's not directly related to Harry Potter, if kids aren't into those characters," Jevning said.

Even for kids that are drawn to a particular themed class, they aren't told exactly what their project should be. "Themes for classes are just a way for us to organize and present for families," Jevning said, "The expectation is kids will be making their own projects. That kind of unfettered freedom in informal learning environment is our schtick."



Older youth get access to a wider range of tools at Leonardo's Basement. Submitted photo.

Kids (and teens) in the 'candy shop'

Leonardo's Basement is rare in the summer camp world in that it offers camps for younger kids as well as people in high school.

"We're one of the few places where teens have choices to do things," Jevning said. "They don't have the range of choices that they do here."

That large age range does present challenges in terms of reaching kids where they are at and making sure every kid has something they feel gravitated toward. Often, teens are drawn to welding and furniture making.

"When kids get older, they can use power tools and different kinds of equipment that younger kids can't," Jevning said.

About a third of the kids that come to Leonardo's Basement know exactly what to do when they get there. "This is their candy shop," Jevning said. "They see all the things and imagine what they might do." For the rest of the kids, they might be curious, but don't have as much experience. "For them it's a revelation," he said.

Those kids might never have known it was possible to build a 20-foot-long two-headed dragon or a scale model of the Millennium Falcon. At Leonardo's Basement, they find that they can.

When: June 10–Aug. 23

Where: Leonardo's Basement, 150 West 60th St.

Cost: \$200, scholarships available

Info: leonardosbasement.org
