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Blowing the dust off my 3D printing dreams

As a kid, I was always interested in the ever-evolving concept of 3D printing. I would sit at my family’s computer and watch YouTube videos of the many creations produced from the futuristic gadget, such as character figurines, plastic puzzles, Phone stands, etc. Without any kind of access to any form of technology used in the videos, I had no way of making these elaborate things. My dreams of harnessing the power of 3D printing had been placed on a shelf and slowly started to collect dust. But after looking at some of the clubs offered at UNT, one stuck out to me. A club that could pull the dreams off the shelf and blow away the “dust”; the 3-D printing club.

When I saw the banner featuring all the members standing with their inventions, it all came back to me. That childlike wonder was yet again instilled in me, However this time, I’d be able to take part in the process. I bet you could have seen my eyes glitter, like a cartoon character finding a treasure chest full of gold coins. I immediately clicked the link to join their group, which was hosted on a popular networking app called Discord.

Discord has always had a liquid-feeling interface with the use of blues and smooth movement amongst the buttons. After I clicked "Accept Invite" with my creaky mouse, I was placed into a space similar to a bee hive. Plenty of channels within the Discord server buzzing with separate conversations about things like Events, Resources, and even information about how to get started with 3D printing. I felt a little overwhelmed at first, but after slowly clicking through each channel and reading some messages, I was quite fascinated. One feature of the club that helped me feel more connected was a channel solely dedicated to showing off photos of the members' pets, one of which was the tiniest, fluffiest, crustiest-eyed dog that was probably named Princess. I began to strike up a conversation with the group. At first I felt like I didn't really belong there, but it turned out a large majority of members from the club had also never previously been involved in any 3D printing, and wanted to learn just like me. Seeing how laid back and comfortable the other members were made me feel comfortable as well. They had a very well populated group, with members there to help you any step of the way.

I knew I wanted to attend one of their meetings, but as it turned out, the soonest meeting would take place about 2 weeks later, ugh. I began to ask the members some general questions about their experiences with the craft. “I mostly 3D Print with my own machines. I have two in working order currently, however when I first began, I was printing at my local library.” Kara Wright answered when asked whether she owns, or borrows printers. Contrary to my childhood belief that everyone except me owned one (except me), It turns out a large majority of members use communal machines in different maker spaces. An example of accessible 3D printing can be found on our own campus, with the SPARK program. The club also has close ties with the program, and aims to hold meetings in their maker space later on in the semester.

Another shocking fact I learned was the “satisfied” nature of a lot of the long-time members. The way Keelan Graves, a Junior majoring in Computer Engineering explains it; “There’s almost a “honeymoon” phase when you first start printing. You’re introduced to the machines and you go crazy printing anything and everything. After a while, you kinda get bored of it and only print when you need something or someone else wants something.” This fact was strange yet understandable. When you gain access to such novel equipment, your mind runs wild. But you slowly become jaded and lose enthusiasm after a while. This explains why some members are so willing to make things for people, seeing the excitement of others is so much greater than any knick knack they could crack out of their machine.

The day of the first meeting had finally arrived on October 3rd. After my third eighty-minute class of the week, I made my way from the environmental science building to the Willis library. The double doors slid open like I was royalty. “Yes! It is I!” Today was the day I was finally able to get my hands on some 3D printing. I made my way over to the SPARK center, which is where they announced the meeting would take place. The group must have been small, since I couldn’t see a large group there. After a few minutes of walking around I opened my phone to message the group, then it hit me. Today was October 1st! I had accidentally come to the library two days before the meeting was held, I guess you could say I was eager to start.

The day of the first meeting had *actually* arrived. After my *sixth* Eighty-minute class of the week, I marched to the Willis library, and when I turned the corner, there was actually a group at the SPARK area. I let out a short sigh of relief. I was a little late but I don't think I ended up missing anything important. I inserted myself into the circle that was formed around a table of boxes and mechanical components. A slim, Bearded man next to me asked “is this your first meeting?” Oh wow, he knew immediately. I confirmed his suspicion, and we struck up a conversation. I shared the fact that I had never previously used a 3D printer, and he seemed quite excited to hear that. He pointed to another member almost directly across the circle from us, and explained how it was only his second meeting, and that they always appreciate new members. He asked me if I wanted to try one of the printers. Of course I did!!! He showed me a website named “Thingiverse” which is basically a social media platform which specializes in 3D printing, and sharing designs. I picked an interesting design, and followed a few more steps from my new friend. The machine made some strange sounds, then began to lay the first layer of plastic. In that moment, it became real.

After that meeting, I knew I liked this group. Everyone was so kind and willing to share their talents and equipment. At its core, the group seeks to expand the accessibility and knowledge of 3D printing to a wider scope of individuals. Whether it’s used to make a post-it note holder, a bottle opener , or an octopus with Dwyane “The rock” Johnson's face on it, The club clearly shares a passion for creating and helping others in our college community.