

# Making as a Celebration: Increasing Access to Creative Technology at the Free Library of Philadelphia

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It's easy to focus on Philadelphia's deficits: it is [the most impoverished of the top-ten large cities](#) in the United States: 28% of Philadelphians (between 430,000 and 440,000 people) live below the federal poverty line. 39% percent (135,000) of those people are children. 23 public schools closed this year, and [55% of residents lack reliable home internet access](#). One thing that Philadelphia does have, however, is a strong library system that supports community and helps to build it with an asset-based approach. The Maker Ed Initiative's [Maker Corps](#), embedded in five Free Library locations in some of Phila-

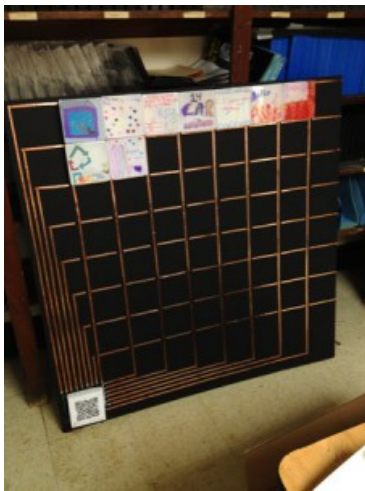
Philadelphia's most underserved communities, is mentoring teens and youth in a variety of maker activities from magnetic races to e-fashion. Our goal is not to highlight educational inequities, or to push kids into a STEM pipeline, but to celebrate and nurture creativity with the aid of technological tools. Instead of having a competition at the end of the summer, we are having a celebration to bring youth from the five sites together to share what they've created with each other, with their families, and with the maker community at large. We're opening up the celebration to 50 participants of all ages and skill levels to share what they make – apply today to be part of it at [celebration.freelibrary.org](http://celebration.freelibrary.org)!

In addition to these daily maker workshops, the Free Library has teamed up with the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education and PennDesign on the Digital Media and Learning Competition-winning Connected Messages program. We wanted to develop a project that had several components: would involve kids working collaboratively to create a modular work of art; would be affordable and easy to implement; would be both physical and digital and have an interactive element (some sort of "magic"); and be meaningful and relevant to youth. Youth are working across five sites to create five 4'x4' physical murals that are comprised of individual 5" square boxes, with an LED in the center. Their box's top (made of clear acetate) is then decorated to describe their own perspective on the City of Brotherly Love and Sisterly Affection, and is backlit by the LED. All of the boxes are pinned to a DIY circuit board, which is connected to the internet through an electric imp. Each box, as well as each mural, has its own page on [connected.ecrafting.org](http://connected.ecrafting.org), where you can read about each creator, and control which boxes are lit.

At our McPherson Square Neighborhood Library, our theme is Community. Drew, the Maker Corps Member there recalled getting the kids to think about their community before he brought out the colored sharpies and LEDs:

"The next step was to discuss the theme and talk about things that each of

them thought of when they think of their community. It was a bit sad to hear their initial responses of “not safe”, “no good”, “staying inside and watching TV”. I wasn’t entirely shocked by these comments...I get to see what their community is like every day. I personally don’t live that far away, either, so at least from an adult’s perspective I know what it’s like. But I was able to get them to start discussing positive things. A lot of the positive emotions came from thoughts of family or statements like “I love my mom”. So we went with that. One of them wanted to make a box about recycling (not because the community is all that trash-conscious, but because it’s something he wanted to say he feels is important to making a community healthy).”



The youth went on to create nine boxes that day. The activity, in this case getting the kids to play with sharpies, copper tape and LEDs, provided them with an opportunity to explore their own concepts of community. If

this is what the maker movement can provide, we’re all in. Come celebrate and participate with us on August 17<sup>th</sup>! Apply to be part of it at [celebration.freelibrary.org](http://celebration.freelibrary.org).

Read more about what we’re doing in Philly on [makerjawn.org](http://makerjawn.org)!