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# Recycled goodness: get inspired with Tinkertopia

In cities all across the world, people lug their random recyclables to special bins from where it’s then hauled away to be turned into more disposable things. But for a couple as committed to the environment as Darcy and **R.R. Anderson**, this process doesn’t go far enough. They created **Tinkertopia**, a place where these castoffs could spark and foster creativity.

Tinkertopia is a “low tech maker’s space,” Darcy Anderson said. She and her husband, R.R., started the downtown business with the idea that the best way to dispose of unwanted stuff is to transform it into art. Visitors can pay a seven dollar drop in fee, and spend an hour and a half in the tinkerspace using the throw-aways of various local manufacturers and artists to create pieces as fascinating as the shop’s rotating window displays created by Darcy.

What I’ve found most intriguing about the shop since its opening in July 2013 – aside from the window art – is that, while coffee and tacos have vacated an area that should be ideal for those goods, Tinkertopia has not just survived, but thrived.

R.R. attributes this success to “government intervention in small business.” Through training and help from the City of Tacoma and Tacoma Pierce County Chamber of Commerce **Spaceworks Tacoma** partnership, the couple has been able to establish a successful store. As with most small businesses, it

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or to rent the space out for a party you aren't just paying for your bag of trinkets. You are paying for time to be creative and inspired.

“One of the main goals was to make this an experience-based business,” Darcy shared. “The beauty of this place is being inspired by weird stuff.”

Now after less than a year, Tinkertopia has become a destination for people from all over; those who visit the downtown museums often can't resist the tantalizing windows inviting them to come in and create.

By packaging the creative experience, Tinkertopia survived its six month trial period and is now a rent paying tenant.

“They have been great, and we hope they are part of the retail down on Pac Ave for a long time,” said Ben Mauk.

Ben shared that what he's found most interesting about working with Tinkertopia has been watching the couple's business model evolve as they went through the Spaceworks program. The shop's main revenue stream is now in programming and events, specifically birthday parties. Groups of up to ten kids can come in and spend two hours learning about reuse, creating in the “tinkerspace.” During the first hour of the party, a Creative Reuse Specialist will teach partiers about the environmental aspect of recycling and reuse, as well as introduce them to the workshop and materials. Then the kids are set free to explore and create.

Darcy said the unstructured free time helps the kids strengthen their creative skills. “Kids are great at seeing the potential in all this weird stuff,” she said.

These parties aren't limited to children. The shop hosts after hours events when adults can also enjoy tinkering, and, as Darcy put it, “letting that inner child play.” Some businesses even host staff meetings in the tinkerspace.

started with a gamble. In this case the gamble was taken by UWT who, through Spaceworks, agreed to let Tinkertopia set up shop for just the cost of utilities. This is the “government intervention”: Spaceworks helps creative entrepreneurs negotiate 6 months of free rent in exchange for the risk of operating in one of Tacoma's chronically vacant or high-turnover spaces.

“The university took a risk with us,” said Darcy Anderson.

Ben Mauk, University of Washington Tacoma Real Estate Manager, said the university got involved with Spaceworks as something of an experiment. They asked for Spaceworks' top three candidates for the Pacific Avenue space, and chose Tinkertopia because it fit in well with the university's plan to populate Pacific Avenue with businesses one can't find anywhere else. And Tinkertopia is unique because they are not only selling a product, but also an experience. When you pay for a studio fee



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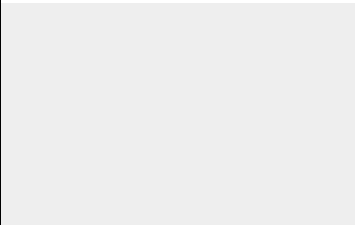
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## About the Author



**Eva Reveal** Eva Reveal is from Puyallup, but spends most of her time in Tacoma where she studies Communications and Computer Science at the University of Washington Tacoma, and works as Editor in Chief of the university’s newspaper, The Ledger.

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Though the business is doing well, the couple wants to continue expanding, and hopes to begin carrying a selection of new art supplies in the near future. You can find Tinkertopia at 1914 Pacific Ave and check their website out at [www.tinkertopia.com](http://www.tinkertopia.com).

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