

# THE MAKING FOUNDATION



**ABOVE:**  
Aaron Ray-  
Dykstra stands  
in The Making  
Foundation.

## Making a Difference

Woodworking studio uses tools to teach skills — and a sense of self-worth.

**A**ARON RAY-DYKSTRA first made his mark in the making world by crafting high-end, custom bicycle frames.

His Six-Eleven Bicycle Co. won accolades from industry insiders and orders from riders across the globe.

But after eight years of welding and filing and sanding solo, Ray-Dykstra was ready to shift gears.

He'd heard the worry from manufacturing leaders about where the next generation of skilled workers would come from. He'd seen kids hanging out near his bicycle shop, transfixed by his tools.

What Ray-Dykstra wanted to make now, he decided, was more makers.

So in 2016, he set up a nonprofit, The Making Foundation. He bought a broken-down building in Roanoke's West End. And he began transforming the abandoned grocery store into an airy, sunlit woodworking shop.

Then he reached out to area school officials with his newly honed mission: to empower kids by teaching them to work with their hands.

He began with a group of at-risk students in an after-school program and later added a class from Noel C. Taylor Academy at Oakland, an alternative learning program of middle and high school students in the Roanoke City public school system.

Today, The Making Foundation teaches students from three elementary schools, three middle schools and three high schools. It also offers home school programs, adult classes and community events. It has scheduled special events for veterans and for teens struggling with mental illness. This summer it's signing up kids for weeklong camps for the first time.

But it's the class of eight Taylor kids who make Ray-Dykstra, 35, feel like he's changing the world.

These are students who have not thrived in the traditional school setting. Ray-Dykstra can relate. He hated school so much he dropped out at 15 and got his GED. He joined the Air Force at 17, bent on leaving his Roanoke roots and never coming back.

Ray-Dykstra says he created the woodworking studio, dubbed Maker Mart, to be the kind of place he wished he'd had as a teen. "We can do things here that can make school make more sense to you," he says.

What Maker Mart is not: a space for make-and-take crafts or a fine arts studio. Ray-Dykstra is serious about teaching learners to use tools, to think spatially, to create items that fill a need in their lives. "We want to do meaningful things here," he explains.

On a Thursday last spring, Community High School students filed into Maker Mart, took their works-in-progress from repurposed grocery store shelves and placed them atop the dozen work benches set up in the space. They sanded, sawed

and stained, each furthering projects crafted from their own designs — knitting needles, a plant hanger, a ukulele, a bedside table. They worked independently, touching base with Ray-Dykstra and another instructor for questions and guidance.

"We're saying: 'We trust these kids. It's okay to make a mistake.' That's your moment to learn," Ray-Dykstra says.

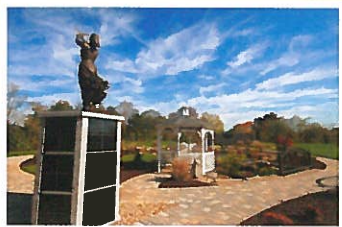
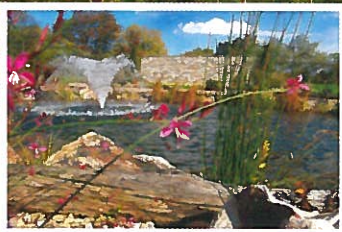
The next step for Maker Mart is to launch a retail shop where students can sell their creations — and perhaps, down the line, even take commissions. This provides opportunities for a whole new set of lessons, Ray-Dykstra explains. Think: marketing and customer service. Perhaps most important of all, it allows students to see items they've made with their hands as something valued by their community.

"We want to introduce kids to — not just skills — but to how the world works."

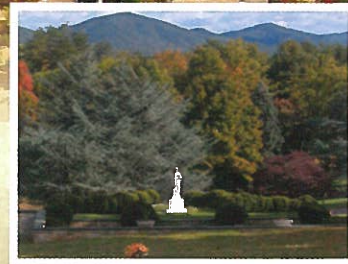
To find out more about Maker Mart classes or its mission, head to [www.makingfoundation.org](http://www.makingfoundation.org).

—CHRISTINA NIFONG

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