

Where everybody knows Matt's name



Matt Conover just missed the maker boom. In 2002, there were no maker faires, tech shops or maker spaces. Pittsburgh had not yet emerged as the national epicenter of innovative learning. Matt, however, was a born maker. Bright and creative, he loved building with Legos and using his hands and imagination.

He never got the chance, though, because in 2002, he lost his battle with cancer. He was twelve years old.

The Conover family lives in Mt. Lebanon. Matt's mother, Noelle, says that during her son's illness, "the community enveloped us" and showed unflinching support for her family. For that reason, she and her husband, Dave, wanted to do something special to thank their hometown. In 2016, the Conovers donated \$25,000 to each of the seven elementary schools in the district to build maker spaces in honor of their son. With help from the Children's Museum of Pittsburgh, a nationally recognized leader in the maker movement, each school built a Matt's Maker Space that reflected its own personality.

"Every space is different," Noelle says. "One school got a sewing machine to teach kids how to sew. Another is devoted to tools and equipment that teach coding."

I was looking forward to visiting Matt's Maker Space at Hoover Elementary School.

The hallway was quiet until the door next to the library opened and sounds of noisy conversations and activity spilled out. Inside, the room was packed with fifth graders, who were thinking, taping, gluing, cutting, painting and pondering how to make a "Not a Box," based on the popular book about a cardboard box that, with a little imagination, turns into completely different things.

"Yesterday, the kids got the assignment and broke into groups to figure out what they wanted to make, so today they have one hour in Matt's Maker Space to create their Not a Box," one of the fifth grade teachers told me.

Bins and boxes filled with fabric, sticks, clothespins, Q-tips, feathers, plastic straws and other materials gave the kids lots of options to let their imaginations run wild. They were eager to tell me about their unique creations, like the whimsical robot with oatmeal box legs, a Kleenex box head, two googly eyes and pipe cleaner antennas.

"I made a tree out of feathers," said a girl, who proudly showed me the red feathers she



banded together to look like a tree planted in front of her box-turned-dollhouse.

Some boys filled a box with soft pom poms and attached a parachute that would keep a fragile item safe if they dropped the box from a height. (Not Empire State Building high, but top of the school high, they told me.)

"What is the significance of the money?" I asked, noticing the fake \$20 and \$100 bills glued to the sides of the box.



"It makes it cool."

I laughed. Of course.

One of my favorite projects was a box turned into a movie projector, which used a magnifying glass for the lens.

"How will it show movies?" I asked the girls who created it.

"With your phone. There's a holder

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inside the box to hold your cell phone in front of the magnifying glass.”

“That’s brilliant!” I was truly impressed.

One of the girls turned to her teacher and giggled.

“This is fun!” she said.

In May 2018, Matt’s Maker Space received formal 501(c)(3) status. In addition to the seven elementary schools, the organization opened a space at UPMC Children’s Hospital of Pittsburgh, which is the first maker space in any pediatric hospital in the US. More spaces were recently created at St. Paul’s Episcopal Nursery School and at the Mt. Lebanon Public Library, which will provide maker programs and offer scholarships to kids who wouldn’t



otherwise have the opportunity to attend a maker camp.

Matt’s Maker Space just received its first grant from the Grable Foundation and the organization’s goal is to continue to build maker spaces and provide maker opportunities for children.

“If I walk down the street in Mt. Lebanon, it means so much to me that every child I see from K-5 knows who Matt is,” Noelle Conover says.



Thanks to the growing legacy of Matt’s Maker Space, kids far beyond the borders of Mt. Lebanon will also know Matt’s name. ■

Ann K. Howley enjoys writing about STEAM-related projects, programs, and activities for kids.

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