

INTERVIEWER: So woodworkers out there, you know the word of the woodshop.

[WOOD CUTTING SOUND]

There's the smell of it. The sound of it. There's nothing like it. But not everyone is traditionally welcome in woodshop. A Minneapolis shop dedicated to marginalized genders is changing that.

Fireweed Community Woodshop reopened last weekend after shuttering during the pandemic. MPR News reporter, Grace Birnstengel, is here to tell us more. Welcome back to the show, Grace.

GRACE Thanks for having me, Tim.

BIRNSTENGEL:

TIM: So what got you in there?

GRACE So I live in South Minneapolis, and I was familiar with the shop back when it was called Women's Woodshop. I

BIRNSTENGEL: knew it was really popular. And to my knowledge, it was pretty unique. You don't actually have to have any experience to take classes there.

And I was pretty bummed when they lost their first base in a few months of the pandemic because I knew it was really popular. And a couple of people mentioned to me that it was reopening, and I have several friends who work in the trades and are not men. So I know from them how masculine that world can be and, therefore, how important spaces like these are.

TIM: Talked a little bit about the trades. Not all of them are the same, but they're woodworking and carpentry. What's the difference here.

GRACE Yeah. So they're not the same, but there's an overlap in the skills. Carpentry is constructing houses or buildings,
BIRNSTENGEL: or other structures, and then putting the appliances in and stuff. And woodworking is making things out of wood.

TIM: And what kind of things are they making at Fireweed? What are they working on down there?

GRACE Yes, so they generally have three types of classes. They have furniture classes where people are making tables
BIRNSTENGEL: or stools. They have craft classes. At Fireweed, they make baskets, wooden boxes, bowls, wooden toys, and then there are really practical classes that are geared toward renovation.

There are a lot of first-time home buyers that go to Fireweed for classes. And one is called Be Your Own Handy Person. There's also a Power Tools 101. And then, I also want to add that there's a sliding scale for payment. And most classes also have two seats saved for people of color to take them for free.

TIM: And it's not just reopening. It's getting a little bigger here. Location, I think, got much larger. Right? What are they doing with it?

GRACE Yeah. So in their old space in the Standish neighborhood, all their tools were on wheels, and they had to be
BIRNSTENGEL: rearranged constantly because it was so small. And this space is triple the size. It's also in a more central location.

It's right off the Franklin Avenue Bridge in Prospect Park. And it's really accessible by bus and bike, which I know is something that was important to them for the new location.

I was there the other day. And it's a really beautiful space that has huge windows. It used to be an upholstery shop. So yeah, the front of the shop has all these big windows.

And you can see the bridge. And there was the sunset. It was one of those pink sunsets the other day that we've been seeing. So it's a great spot.

TIM: Much better than the shop at Coon Rapids High School where I went. The cinder block bunker where I learned to do woodwork.

GRACE I hope so.

BIRNSTENGEL:

TIM: But this place is doing quite well. I understand it was very popular before the pandemic.

GRACE Yeah. They had, I was told, 1,000 students every year, usually, and about 100 classes and 40ish instructors.

BIRNSTENGEL: Mostly, I should say, women and non-binary instructors.

TIM: And I believe you said you were at a table making class on Wednesday. Are these stationary tools? Hand tools? What's actually going on there?

GRACE Yeah, so there were seven students. It's a mix of stationary tools and hand tools. Like, half and half, I would say.

BIRNSTENGEL: The students were in their third week of the class. And they were milling the wood they're going to use for their tables, which means, to my understanding, using tools to shape the lumber into wood you can-- or excuse me.

Shape the wood into lumber-- that's the way it goes-- that you can use for tables. It was really chill. Just people, kind of-- they were confident. Confidently using power saws. Helping each other out. It was a great environment.

And I was really curious what types of people were drawn to that space. And the founder, Jess Hirsch, she said that there's four different categories of people that tend to take classes. It's friends that want to take a class together. Not necessarily even woodworking, but that's what they landed on. Sometimes people want to switch careers and get into the trade, so they take a class there.

Woodworking class in high school. Like you mentioned Tim, a lot of the times, young girls or non-binary people feel unwelcome in those classes or maybe pushed out because they're pretty masculine, like I said earlier. And then, there are also people who say they have access to the tools from family members, but were never taught how to use them and want to take advantage of that.

TIM: So I've been at a couple of these places. The Minneapolis Tool Library, I've been to their shop. It's kind of nice. What makes this place different? What's what brings folks to this one?

GRACE Well, I think it's the safety and the support that they can get in that environment and knowing that you can come

BIRNSTENGEL: in, no skills needed. And I actually talked to one of the co-chairs of the board there who also teaches spoon carving for people of color.

They have classes that are just for people of color. And then, she also was taking the class on Wednesday. So here is Vanessa Walton talking about why this space is so important.

VANESSA WALTON: I am really thankful for this space. I'm thankful for our community. I really want to welcome people to come here. We certainly are geared towards women and non-binary people, but we have classes that are open to all genders. And we try to create spaces that are specifically also for BIPOC folks too so they can learn from instructors who represent their communities.

And I think, yeah, I just want to make it clear that we are open, and we are here, and we welcome all people. And so we really want you to come down and take a class. Check out our space.

GRACE BIRNSTENGEL: That's awesome.

VANESSA WALTON: Yeah.

TIM: Spoon carving. An art after my grandmother's heart. You know, the pandemic was really hard on a lot of these places that depended on a lot of people to support them, places that help people come together. How does this place make community beyond its walls?

GRACE BIRNSTENGEL: Yeah, so they didn't actually completely shut down during the pandemic. They switched to doing some Zoom classes where they could. But, obviously, Zoom is not an ideal environment for learning how to do woodworking. And most people don't have power saws at home.

TIM: Hard to be hands-on on the laptop there.

GRACE BIRNSTENGEL: Exactly. So I think it's really community building and that people are together, have actual access to the tools, and can give each other feedback on their projects. And I asked the founder who I mentioned earlier, Jess Hirsch, to tell me more about what you just asked, and here is her on that.

JESS HIRSCH: It is so supportive. It's like, people will clap for you after you use the table saw for the first time. People feel-- If you have inhibitions about a tool, you can ask for multiple demos. We can do dry runs without the machine on.

It's never a space to judge or watch each other in a negative way. We're just learning from each other. And that nurturing space is really cultivated by our instructors and, pretty naturally, by other students. It's a really supportive place. And I think just due to the goals of the people coming to the shop, I think it maintains that throughout.

TIM: You talked about power tools here. Do people have to have experience to go to this place?

GRACE BIRNSTENGEL: No, they don't. No experience is necessary for most of the classes. I think, some of them, you're required to take Power Tools 101 beforehand.

But most of them, you don't have to have experience. And everybody there is really nice, so don't be intimidated if you want to take a class. And their website is fireweedwoodshop.org, which has a list of their roster of classes.

TIM: And that's Grace Birnstengel, a reporter here at Minnesota Public Radio News. Thanks for sharing.

GRACE Thank you, Tim.

BIRNSTENGEL: