

A Woman On A Mission To Inspire Young Makers

By Justine Benstead | Tuesday, March 25, 2014

Related Images

Related Tags

Learning is for everyone, says Learning is for Everyone co-founder Terri Willingham. Redundant? Not to Willingham. She has made it her mission to inspire and educate individuals of all ages.

"I think one of the saddest things is people who are disinterested," Willingham says. "All the time, we hear about people who walk by things that they shouldn't be walking by. What if we stopped walking by because we are able to engage with each other, because we're curious, because we're interested, because we see a way that we can help?"

Willingham helps by helping the volunteer-led nonprofit organization Learning is for Everyone, a collaborative learning community that produces several large-scale educational events each year in the Tampa Bay region.

Up next is [Gulf Coast MakerCon](#), a two-day, all-ages innovators festival that takes place April 5-6, 2014, on the Florida State Fairgrounds.

"I've heard so many people and kids say, 'I can't do that. I can't make that'," Willingham explains. "The message of MakerCon is 'I bet you can'."

A Curiosity-Driven Life

As the programs chair for Learning is for Everyone, Willingham coordinates experiential learning programs like Gulf Coast MakerCon as well as [ROBOCON Tampa Bay](#), FIRST robotics showcases and [TEDxYouth@TampaRiverwalk](#).

Part of L4E's mission includes fostering "engaging learning experiences that empower people to be active creators instead of passive consumers," Willingham explains. "We want people to experience the joys of a curiosity-driven life, because it's a fulfilling, productive and compassionate way to live."

[Learning is for Everyone, Inc.](#) is a 501 (c)(3) nonprofit organization based in Tampa, Florida. Founded in 2003 by Willingham and several partners, the nonprofit has evolved over the years. Mentorship, however, has remained in focus.

"We try to bring in the business community to show how important it is for long-term economic development to provide mentoring support to kids," says Willingham. "We want to keep these kids here (in Tampa)."

"I hear people say, 'Why aren't we Silicon Valley?' Well, there is a Silicon Valley! We want to be Silicon Bay," Willingham explains. "We have all the skills, talent, energy and enthusiasm right here in Tampa."

FIRST In Florida

Willingham grew up in Miami and attended Florida International University before moving to the Tampa Bay area in 1999 and writing for the (then) St. Petersburg Times.



Along with her current voluntary role as programs chair for L4E, Willingham is regional director of [FIRST in Central Florida](#).

Willingham's son, who was home-schooled and now works as a programmer at SourceToad in Tampa, participated in a FIRST Lego League team at the elementary and middle school level. When he aged out at 14 and wanted to continue with FIRST (For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology), Willingham realized there was no program for home-schooled children in the local region -- so she created one.

"We started with five kids who met in our garage in 2008," she says.

Through web searches of local engineers and a few cold calls, Willingham found mentors. More members joined.

A writer and photographer by trade, Willingham emphasizes, "It's all about the mentor experience. Everything we do is intended to be collaborative. Why keep reinventing the wheel? We can help each other out by sharing what we know, and we can all move forward together with the strength of our shared skills and knowledge."

A L4E-sponsored FIRST team now in its sixth year, [Team Duct Tape](#), earned the top Inspire Award at the FIRST Tech Challenge State Championship at Embry Riddle Aeronautical University in early 2014, finishing in 1st place out of nearly 100 teams statewide. The FIRST Tech Challenge team competed with 71 other teams from around the south at FIRST Tech in San Antonio in early 2014.

"L4E believes deeply in the power of FIRST to empower youth," Willingham shares. "The central tenant of the FIRST model is a character-driven theme that focuses on gracious professionalism -- competition with compassion."

Makers And Mentors

Gulf Coast MakerCon expects to draw a crowd of 800-1,000 at the [Florida State Fairgrounds](#) on April 5-6, 2014. The festival, which runs from 10 a.m.-6 p.m., will be held at the 40,000-square-foot Special Events Center West at the Fairgrounds.

It will feature an indoor/outdoor event venue, exhibits associated with the [Florida Artist Blacksmith Association](#), a special Young Makers section for kids and families, and much more.

MakerCon places an emphasis on technical, creative and professional displays, workshops and sessions covering everything from patent development and 3D printing to robotics, programming and design.

Activities and exhibits centered on students' interests will allow kids the opportunity to learn about creative projects, such as developing components of video or board games.

"Almost anything anybody likes to do can become productive," says Willingham.

Dan Flisek, a civilian physicist working for the U.S. Navy, will be a vendor at Gulf Coast MakerCon 2014.

"I'll be running a 'home chemistry' booth, showcasing some of the fun things I do in my home laboratory," Flisek says. "I'm trying to rekindle the spark of the scientist in people by showing off some of the amazing things that can be done if you just put your mind to it."

Gulf Coast MakerCon 2014 is funded through in-kind donors, sponsors, vendor fees, ticketing and a grant from [Hillsborough County's Economic Development Initiative fund](#).

Advance ticket sales run through April 3rd. Ticket prices on the day of the event will be \$15 per day for adults (13+), \$8 per day for children ages 5-12, and free for kids under five. For additional information, contact [Gulf Coast MakerCon](#).

Justine Benstead is a freelance writer who spends her days walking her dog Chloe in her South Tampa neighborhood, drinking far too much coffee, tweeting, and taking photos with her trusty Nikon. Comments? Contact [83 Degrees](#).