

Failure and discovery

Area 59 to foster innovation for local entrepreneurs

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When Area 59 Director Ian Scott looks around the 50,000-square-foot building off Highway 59, all he sees are possibilities. He likened the “maker space” to “a gym for people that like to build things with robots and lasers.” News Record Photo/Rhianna Gelhart

Area 59 is pretty empty right now.

The maker space's director, Ian Scott, is the only person in it and aside from his office, several tables, 20 computers and a 3-D printer, it doesn't have much equipment.

When curious people come into former tire store next to Dalbey Memorial Park, Scott has to take them on an "imagination tour," where he tells how there will be six 3-D printers in this corner, mills and lathes in that area.

Much has been said about Area 59's potential for students at both the K-12 and college levels, and it will have camps for kids this summer starting in June. But small businesses stand to benefit greatly from it as well, and Scott can't wait for people to start using the space.

He likened the maker space to "a gym for people that like to build things with robots and lasers."

Area 59 has 50,000 square feet, which "rivals maker spaces in San Francisco and Boston," Scott said, adding that one of the biggest struggles for maker spaces starting out is getting equipment.

When Area 59 is fully equipped, it will have \$1.5 million worth of 3-D printers, laser cutters, table saws, lathes, mills and graphic design software, to name a few amenities.

The tools may be cool, Scott said, but "a maker space isn't necessarily about the tools. They're great to have, but it's the mindset" that really matters.

That entrepreneurial spirit — the willingness to fail a thousand times before finding success — will be fostered and encouraged at Area 59.

"We celebrate failure," he said. "(Area 59) is about discovery, it's about doing stuff you may not have been comfortable with five, 10 minutes ago. It's a place for experimentation and making yourself grow.

"Area 59 is about change."

If there's one problem with Area 59, it's that "the scope is so broad and vast that it's very hard to say what's going to come out of it," he said.

Clearing the hurdle

What Home Depot did for home improvement and the DIY movement, maker spaces can do for the manufacturing industry, Scott said. They level the playing field.

Before maker spaces, if someone has an idea for a product and wants to make a prototype, it could cost \$60,000 to \$80,000, Scott said, and that's before the project even has been sold.

It's one of the biggest hurdles that small businesses face, said Phil Christopherson, CEO of Energy Capital Economic Development.

"Most people don't have that (money) lying around," Scott said, and there's a good possibility that, after spending thousands of dollars, the prototype won't even work.

A maker space isn't meant to be a production line; rather, it's "a great place to start building ideas or a basic prototype," said Zach Aars, a local video game developer and CEO of Alkain Studios.

"You can go there, make it, see if it's viable, see what you can make with it further down the road," he said.

Scott said one of the drawbacks to living in Gillette is that "we don't have this huge market that we can tap into like Los Angeles and Chicago."

But that's not as large of a hurdle anymore thanks to the Internet, where "all of a sudden, you've got a global market for a product," he said, whether it's Amazon or Etsy. And with crowdfunding websites like Kickstarter or Indiegogo, "you don't have to have a physical product. You just to have an idea."

Area 59 can be the place where people can take the first steps to making their idea a reality.

Upgrading people

Area 59 has potential to impact industries besides manufacturing, Scott said, because "any industry can upgrade their people."

Working in a maker space forces one to think outside the box and look at things from a different perspective.

"It lends itself to creative dexterity," he said.

Paul Blinkinsop, owner and CEO of God Inspired Games of Gillette, is very close to releasing his first video game and he's working on a second. He said he might use Area 59 to make prototypes of action figures of characters from his games, but he's also excited that it can be used as a training ground.

He hopes to have 100 employees and multiple departments, but that is still years in the future. For now, Blinkinsop has one part-time employee and he plans to hire two 3-D modelers, one this year and one next year.

It's slow, but that's how small businesses grow, Christopherson said, pointing out that L&H Industrial started out with just six employees.

"We create jobs one, two and three at a time, and those are all successes," he said.

The next L&H might come out of Area 59, Christopherson said, probably "not in the next five, 10 or 15 years, but maybe in 20 or 30 or 40 years."

Blinkinsop said he's excited about the proposed classes at Area 59 teaching people how to use Adobe Suite. He wants to hire people locally, and he's more concerned about their art than their experience.

"Say they have some art I like but they're kind of new to it. As long as their work is good and is what we need from our company, I'll hire them, but send them over to Ian to get that certificate," he said.

Aars said while he has some experience with that software, he plans to "take those classes to see what I can learn."

Chris Leatherman, a drone pilot and CEO of Aerial Solutions of Wyoming, said he's also excited. He has a few ideas already, including teaching kids about drones and using 3-D printers to make drone parts. He's even looking at the possibility of printing an entire drone.

If a community wants to diversify, it has to support its innovators and entrepreneurs, Christopherson said.

"It's great to bring in big companies, but there are a lot of companies here that could use a place like this to test different types of technologies," Leatherman said. "This will innovate local business."

"We want the engineer working next to the artist working next to the sixth-grader who knows how to program a micro-controller," Scott said. "We want those creative clashes because that's where true innovation comes from."

"It's an open-source community. We're OK with sharing our ideas, and when you share ideas, tweaks happen, improvements are made."

The coolest thing

Scott had a hand in designing the Pronghorn Center at Gillette College. It's an incredible building, he said, but it wasn't until the first basketball game was played in it, "with people screaming and yelling," that he saw how amazing it actually is.

It's the same with Area 59.

"Right now it's a cool building," he said. "We get all the stuff in here, it's going to be cool, but it's not going to be awesome until we get people in here."

Although it'll be cool to watch ideas become realities, "what happens to the people within that process is going to be the coolest thing," he said.