

WORKSHOP HOUSTON

Founded in 2003 by Seth Capron, Katy Goodman, Benjamin Mason, and Zach Moser as a community bicycle repair center/youth empowerment program, Workshop Houston is a positive and positively huge force in Houston, Texas' impoverished 3rd Ward neighborhood. Workshop includes, in addition to its ever-improving Bike Shop, Chopper Shop (a low-rider bike workshop), Beat Shop (a hip-hop music workshop), Style Shop (a clothing design/screen printing workshop) and an academic support program called Scholar Shop. MAJOR.

We caught up with two of the deservedly proud founders, Zach Moser and Benjamin Mason, to hear how they did it.

Photographs by Celeste Tammariello



Brendan Fowler: So, it seems like the project has grown a great deal beyond your initial concept. What were you first hoping to accomplish?

Zach Moser: When we first started, we didn't have any specific long-term goals. Our first goal was to provide a service to the community that would be accepted as part of the community. We had a hypothesis that, by providing the tools for people to fix their own bikes and the opportunity for kids to earn bikes and left the rest of the format open, a variety of people from the neighborhood would find the shop accessible and start making it into their own. Can you improve a neighborhood and the lives of the kids in that neighborhood without imposing your own cultural values? We thought that the bike activity might be a medium that could accomplish this.

BF: And then how did things build from there?

ZM: From the get-go, the Bike Shop was a big success. It was full whenever we opened and adults and kids alike were using the services in many different ways. We were quite happy with the success of the shop, but through our interactions we saw just how hard the lives of some of our participants were. We also saw many of them get into serious trouble—getting kicked out of school and going to jail. Our bike programs were not enough to hold these kids' attention and to help keep them from getting caught up in negative activities. So, through conversations with the kids and working within our other interests we decided to add more programs geared towards teens. The first new shop was the Chopper Shop, where we teach welding and metal fabrication, and students can build chopper and low-rider bikes. We then added the Beat Shop, with facilities for music production, DJing, and recording; and the Style Shop, with silkscreen and fashion design studios. Our most recent addition is the Scholar Shop that we started to give our students academic support. Each of the shops is based on the same premise of providing hands-on projects that help make education accessible and relevant.

BF: Were you surprised by the support you received?

ZM: I think, more than surprised, we are constantly amazed and grateful. We have worked really hard to get to where we are now, and a lot of wonderful people have helped us a great deal. Houston is a great city that supports a lot of great projects of our size, and we were hoping this would be the case when we moved down here.

BF: I heard that you were originally from Houston and left, returning just to start the program and bringing a few people with you to help. How did the program initially start?

ZM: I left Houston to go to school in Ohio, not at all knowing what I wanted to do. While there, I became involved in community projects and eventually began leading projects of my own. While we were in Ohio at Oberlin College, the collaborative group that started Workshop Houston came together to start a community celebration called The Big Parade. We received a good deal of recognition for this event, and from that got funded to come down to Houston to start the Bike Shop with a fellowship from the Compton Foundation. We did not necessarily come to Houston just because I was from here. We all knew that we didn't want to move to the cities that all of the other liberal arts school graduates were moving to. We were also looking for a city that would really need our kinds of projects. [but had] enough money to support our projects. Houston fit these goals perfectly, and it has worked out wonderfully.

BF: How many people are working/volunteering?

ZM: We have grown a lot over the last year. This past summer, we had 10 employees running the summer programs and working on building renovations, as well as around 10 regular volunteers helping out in the various shops. We also have a large group of volunteers (more than 100 people) who come to help with various one-day or time-to-time projects.

BF: How many people run each "shop"?

ZM: Two or three people run each shop when it is open, depending on the shop. This summer we hired our first youth instructor, who is a former program



participant, and we hope to continue to find jobs in our shops for the youth that come out of our programs.

BF: About how many kids are you having participate in each one?

WH: This summer, we had around thirty students participate in the Style Shop, and same with the Beat Shop. About 25 youth worked on projects in the Scholar Shop. The Bike Shop has about 60 people a week come through, about half youth and half adults. So far 90 people have completed Earn-a-Bike since we opened in January, and almost the same amount are in progress.

BF: Houston has an amazing grass roots rap music scene. Is there any interaction between it and the Beat Shop yet?

ZM: There is not that much yet. With our move we have barely got the Beat Shop up and running and we are now just starting to reach out and tell people we exist, with the main aim being to connect to the Houston scene.

BF: You are in the process of switching spaces, right? Have you found a semi-permanent location?

ZM: We have found a great location right in the middle of the Third Ward. We have recently raised the money to purchase three buildings to house all of the shops, so we now own the property. We have renovated one of the buildings to house the Bike Shop and the Chopper Shop. We are about to get started on renovating the Style Shop / Scholar Shop building, and then, as more funds hopefully come in, we will renovate the Beat Shop building next spring.

BF: What will be the next shop?

ZM: We haven't really thought about that at this point. We just opened the Scholar Shop, and our main goal right now is to expand the amount of programming out of each shop. We would like to offer the resources each shop provides to not just teenagers, but to adults and younger kids, as well as be able to keep the shops open more days each week.

BF: I feel like there must be so many incredibly gratifying interactions happening a day... are there any really major highlights you'd like to share?

Benjamin Mason: I think that we are all just blown away by how lucky we are to get to work with so many amazing people. I think that one of my favorite things to see is when people who use the shops regularly really start to get involved with helping other people. It's great when someone comes in with a bike problem and one of the kids who is at the shop every day just steps up and helps them fix it. Some of them are only nine or ten years old, but they've been regulars at the Bike Shop since we opened, and are really good mechanics now.

It is hard to come up with stories to encapsulate the project. There was the time KT was talking to a group of kids about safety before going on a ride, and told them that they had to wear helmets because the bike shop motto was "Safety First". She finished explaining the rules, and then asked the group if anyone remembered what the bike shop motto was. Everyone looked confused for a second, until one kid raised her hand and said, "I know! Best Friends Forever!" Which is now the official Workshop Houston motto.

BF: I've heard that Houston is in a super charitable time period. Is this true? And I guess, more importantly, could you see doing this same project in a city other than Houston?

BM: People in Houston, in general, are really generous and supportive. We've met so many great people here who have helped us establish Workshop Houston. It certainly doesn't hurt that the energy industry is making record profits, and Houston is the hub of that. There are a lot of great local corporate giving programs and private foundations, many of which are supported

by the energy industry, but I don't really know enough to say whether or not right now is better than its ever been.

As for the second part of your question, we don't currently have plans to take Workshop Houston to any other cities, but we are looking to eventually create a model that others could use to provide similar opportunities for kids in other areas. We work collectively and are very responsive to the needs of our participants; from this it has been difficult to define our process and structure. We are working on it, and eventually we might be able to tell people how we do what we do.

BF: The pictures of the Beat Shop are so crazy; they fully look like you combined beat making and an actual workshop. What do people think of the space?

BM: Well, because we aren't fully moved into our new spaces yet, we ran the Style and Beat Shops in the Bike Shop this summer. Every morning we would take all the bike stands down and set up all the computers, tables, screen printing stuff, whatever we needed for class that day. Then, after class, we would pack it all back up and store it in one of the shipping containers. It was a bit of a hassle, but it actually worked out well.

We're still renovating the other two buildings, but once we finish with them we will have dedicated spaces for all five of the shops (Beat, Bike, Chopper, Scholar, Style) plus an office, a future residency space, and a home for another great local non-profit that puts out an awesome magazine called *Objectif* and does a bunch of other stuff. The Beat Shop will have a recording space, practice rooms, a computer lab, a DJ area and space to hang out. The Style Shop will have sewing/crafting area, a full screenprinting shop, and a computer lab. It's going to be amazing.

Overall, one of our goals is to create the best possible spaces for all of our programs. We want to bring professional quality resources into all of the shops. We just finished the renovation of the Bike Shop, which was a night-club-turned-bar-turned-hamburger-stand-turned-dog-fighting-spot, and the response has been really great. We did all the renovations ourselves, which ended up meaning that we pretty much gutted the entire building and started from the studs. We spent a lot of time on the work because we believe that our participants deserve the best possible workspace, and I think everyone who comes into the shop appreciates that.

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