

Manufacturing, robotics Fab Lab opens at University Mall in Tampa

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Jaymi Butler | Tuesday, June 11,
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"If you can imagine it, you can do it here."

That spirit of endless creativity is the central concept behind the new Advanced Manufacturing & Robotics Center (AMRoC) Fab Lab at University Mall that is kicking off its launch with a slate of special programming all summer.

"We want to help people be more curious," says Terri Willingham, executive director of the nonprofit Foundation for Community Driven Innovation. "No idea is off limits."

Willingham, a longtime writer, educator, and social entrepreneur, came across the Fab Lab model about five years ago and knew it would be a great fit for the FCDI -- and the Tampa Bay Area as a whole. Founded at MIT, there are now 1,600 Fab Labs across the globe, all

sharing a common goal of democratizing access to tools for technical invention.

“I think it’s so exciting to be here at ground level as this is happening,” Willingham says. “I love walking in here in the morning.”

And for good reason. AMRoC has something for everyone. Entrepreneurs can use the lab’s 3D printers to create product prototypes and can also take advantage of business consulting services. Students can participate in robotics activities and competitions. Those interested in learning a trade can go through certification programs that can lead to well-paying jobs in the technology, industrial and manufacturing fields. And there is ever-changing educational programming for all ages on STEM-related topics.

“We’re like a community center with tools,” Willingham says. “We want people to walk in and throw out ideas, or just sit down and work.”

Although AMRoC is celebrating its grand opening this month, the 7,500-square-foot space has already hosted more than 600 people since it opened its doors in October. It was seeded with a grant from the Argosy Foundation, along with support from the Lightning Foundation and SOFWERX. Its partners also include Sensible Micro, Ultimate 3D Printers, US Auto Training, eSmart Recycling, PLuGHiTz Live and the Tampa-Hillsborough Public Library Cooperative. Willingham notes that University Mall and its owners have been especially supportive of the lab as a vital part of the mall’s transformation into a hub for the Uptown Tampa district.

“The mall believes in what we’re doing,” she says. “It’s a whole collaborative community coming together to lift up the area and create a meaningful space.”

Aside from sponsor and partner support, AMRoC will offer individual, family, and corporate memberships to sustain the space. The memberships will provide access to wood and metalworking tools, the 3D printers, and communal workspaces.

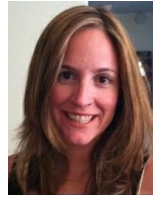
Scheduled summer activities include:

- First Fridays at the Fab Lab Meetups
- ASCII Warriors Programming Club for high school and college students, starting June 12
- STEAM Story Time for early elementary students, with Joiner Library, starting June 20
- Entrepreneurship Academy for Middle Schoolers July 5-26 (June 30th registration deadline)
- Open K-12 recruitment for four youth robotics teams

Willingham is hopeful that AMRoC will pave the way for similar innovations in the Tampa Bay Area in the future.

“I hope to see more of these spaces where people can go and create,” she says. “Find your passion and you can build your future.”

For more information, including upcoming events, [visit the AMRoC website](#).



Read more articles by Jaymi Butler.

Jaymi Butler is a writer and editor who enjoys telling the stories of growth and innovation in the Tampa Bay Area, which she has called home since 2003. A former reporter for the Savannah Morning News, The State, and The Tampa Tribune, she has covered a variety of topics ranging from business to features to public health -- and she even got to sit in on an American Idol audition just feet away from Simon Cowell!