



Cara Westin poses with the Zoltar recreation she helped build at MakerHQ.

PHOTO COURTESY OF CARA WESTIN

Big makers, tiny space

In a 700-square-foot floor plan, you've got to use the space efficiently—especially if it's shared by a dozen creative people working sporadically on various technology projects. Cara Westin is a member-turned-board member of MakerHQ, the petite fabrication space on the edge of downtown and Midtown. She got involved to pursue a passion with robotics, and has since worked on a number of interactive products. For example, MakerHQ's life-size *Tetris* game owes 1,200 joints of solder to Westin alone. SN&R chatted with the third-year user of MakerHQ about what it's like getting to create there.

What's your background?

I actually worked for the city, and when I retired, I opened up a gym. So I have a gym downtown where I do strength training, I coach. So this is just kind of something I've been interested in. I've been fascinated by robotics my whole life. I was looking for a place to fit in as an older retired person with no knowledge, and I found MakerHQ.

One of the projects that Richard [Julian, MakerHQ co-founder,] and I have been kicking around is a robotic lawnmower. Swarm lawnmowers—lots of robotic lawn mowers that would be able to communicate with each other.

How is it working in such a small space?

Well, I mean, it's what we were able to afford. The big places like Hacker Lab, they have either large grants from the city or are supported by Sierra College, things like that. There are really only two maker spaces, Hacker Lab and us. ...It's tough to keep a space like that going, buy the equipment—this is kind of a labor of love.

What do you work on at the space?

We've built a replica of Deep Thought from *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* that responded

to voice recognition. ... One of the big projects we did for Makers Faire was Wall of Fortune. It was an escape room-themed project with four puzzles that kids had to work through, or adults. We created a replica of Zoltar from *Big*.

One of the other big projects we worked on was a 10-foot-tall *Tetris* game that's now down at Worlds of Wonder, a Lodi children's museum.

What's the space like?

We make the most of it. It's literally a tiny little wedge of space on the southwest corner of 16th and X. ... All the members and founders built in a bunch of benches—we've literally made the most of the space.

Is there value to having a smaller space?

Well, it's obviously more intimate. We couldn't have 100 members even if we wanted to; the value of that it's affordable to us. We couldn't keep the space open if it was twice the size or was a fancy space ... but y'know, when we're in there working, we're all there within 3 feet of each other. When we have a meet-up or something, we're all sitting around one big table. It's one big room.

We're small. We have very rarely had someone join that didn't kind of fit.

Is there a lengthy application process?

No. In fact, I just got an email from someone who's like, "I code video games, would I be able to come in and use the space to code video games as a hobby?" And I emailed back, "Of course, as long as you don't mind there being people there while you work!"

Any interesting projects coming up?

I'm very interested in the interactions—emotional interactions—between humans and robots, so we're starting to work on building what we call "Hugbot"—which is a robot that's capable of giving you a hug—and seeing how people react.that. □

Learn more about MakerHQ at makerhq.com and check out its Instagram, @makerhq.

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