

Walnut Hill: A Tool Lending Library
By: Christopher Malo

Need an adjustable dado blade for a day? No problem. How about a squirrel trap, just for the weekend? Got it. Or a 40' aluminum extension ladder for a few hours? It might be checked out.

Nestled in a nondescript warehouse space at 1314 South 47th Street is the new home of the West Philadelphia Tool Library, a concept simple, smart, and just as it sounds. The library loans out tools to its members to maintain their properties, complete projects, take care of their yards or gardens, or any other reason they may have for borrowing one of the 2,500 plus tools in the collection.

Its concept is not unique to Philadelphia, with various tool libraries in over twenty cities across the country, such as Atlanta, Oakland, Buffalo and Portland. But the West Philly Tool Library is the first of its kind here. Started informally in 2007 by Michael Froelich, an attorney at Community Legal Services, the library officially opened on March 15, 2008. The West Philadelphia resident had first heard of the idea while elsewhere in the country, but upon his return to Philadelphia, thought it would be a great idea to begin here.

Each member pays a yearly fee, between \$25 and \$50, based on a sliding scale according to income. There is also a lifetime membership option for \$200. Then they are allowed to take out tools as needed, for up to one week. As with traditional book libraries, there are late fees. The cost is \$1 for each day each tool is kept past the due date.

If growth is the measure of success, the West Philadelphia Tool Library has been successful in its short three and a half year existence. What started in a small space donated by West Philadelphia real estate developer Guy Laren, with wood provided by Woodland Building Supply's Larry Reese, and a fraction of the the number of tools the library now boasts, the library has grown to just shy of 1,000 members, with 351 different people borrowing tools this year alone. Over the summer, it also moved into a much larger space to accommodate its expanding collection of tools.

Even with the increase in membership, yearly fees alone aren't enough for the library to sustain itself completely. Operating costs include the building rent, two tool librarians on staff, and the acquisition of new tools. Although at times tools are donated, as was a large collection recently gifted to the library from Gene and Patricia Woock, they are also purchased as needed with money from grants. The rest of the budget is comprised of grants and donations from such places as the University of Sciences in Philadelphia, Councilwoman Jannie Blackwell and the Philadelphia Activities Fund, PhillyCarShare, the Samuel S. Fels Fund, the Sparkplug Foundation, SCI-West, the Spruce Hill Community Association, and others. The West Philly Tool Library also operates as a project of the Urban Affairs Coalition.

"They are our fiscal agent," explains Jake Blanch, member of the tool library's steering committee. "We, as an organization, don't have non-profit status. What the UAC does is manage our paychecks for the librarians, taxes and other financial duties. It is a relationship we have been maintaining for a long time and the grants are separate." According to Form 990 tax filings by the Urban Affairs Coalition for the fiscal year ending June 30, 2010, the coalition took in more than \$30 million, which it uses to unite "government, business, neighborhoods, and individual initiatives to improve the quality of life in the region, build wealth in urban

communities, and solve emerging issues.” The library relies on the coalition’s non-profit 501(c) (3) status for applying for their own grants. “We don’t actually get funding from the UAC, but we get grants because of their non-profit status, as a project of the UAC,” Blanch says.

He originally stopped by the tool library one day to check it out, and instead became a part of the steering committee, the six person decision making body for the library. Even after time, Blanch is still impressed by what the library accomplishes.

“It’s such a great resource, for a number of reasons,” he says. “You don’t have to buy all the tools you need to maintain your property. The other aspect is the community involvement. People meet there, people come together there, people share projects there. It’s become a real hub for all the people in the neighborhood. People coming from very different backgrounds, coming from very different places, that would of never struck up a conversation.”

There certainly seems to be a need, if not demand, in the neighborhood surrounding the library for the services it provides. According to the Board of Revision of Taxes, there are 3,362 properties in the Cedar Park and Walnut Hill neighborhoods, 73.44% of which are residential. In the Department of Licenses and Inspection’s 2000 survey, it found only 4.13% of these properties to be vacant. The 2000 U.S. Census reports that of those, 72.03% are renters and 27.97% are owner occupied. The census also lists the median year structures in the neighborhood were built as 1941, so it is only natural for some of the properties to need repair 70 years later. The Licenses and Inspection department found in 2005 that 30.96% of the houses in these two neighborhoods to have open housing code violations. But with 22.14% of the population in the area falling below the poverty line according to the 2000 Census, the idea of a community sharing resources makes sense.

From power tools, to carpentry and woodworking tools, concrete and masonry tools, gardening tools and books, if you happen to need it, there is a good chance the library might have it. And the strangest tool he has come across in the collection? “The Super-painter Padomatic Painting Kit,” Blanch says without blinking.

It isn’t a painting kit that bring lifetime member and neighborhood resident Larry Lee in on a Monday evening. Lee is returning a wheelbarrow after borrowing it to move the chopped wood he split.

“Mine broke three years ago, so I come here,” he explains. “It seemed like such a great idea to be able to share tools. I already had a house I was fixing for myself for eight years, so I had a lot of tools. If I were starting out I would do this anyway, so I donated a lot of tools, and for the tools I don’t have, I come here.”

Lee takes tools out a few times a month, except in the summer when he stops by weekly to checkout a weed-whacker to trim his lawn.

“I think its a tremendous service.”

The West Philly Tool Library continues to increase and expand it’s membership well past the borders of West Philadelphia. This year it won Philadelphia Magazine’s Best of Philly prize for Best DIYers Secret. Anyone can stop in to become a member, not only West Philadelphia residents, during the library’s operating hours, Monday through Thursday from 6:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. and Saturdays from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m..

Sources:

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