



Photos by GLEN STUBBE • gstubbe@startribune.com

Henry McGlasson, 7, sawed what became the base of a go-cart he was making at Leonardo's Basement in Minneapolis last week with the help of instructor Tara Fahey. Classes have supervision by specialists.

# A basement of big ideas

- From "projectile manufacturing" to robots made of Legos, Steve Jevning sparks the curiosity and imagination of children. Now he's applying the process to adults.

## SMALL BUSINESS DICK YOUNGBLOOD



Considering that youngsters age 6 to 16 are the principal clients of a south Minneapolis enterprise that offers offbeat educational opportunities, a sign above one class area might be regarded with some disquiet.

"Projectile Manufacturing," it reads.

Welcome to Leonardo's Basement, a nonprofit business that Steve Jevning started in 1999 to spark the curiosity and imagination of children — and then to cultivate the creativity and innovation to manufacture their brainstorm.

So yes, the kids actually do build projectiles, ranging from air-powered bottle rockets propelled by hand pumps to a plastic funnel equipped with a model rocket engine that turned it into what

Jevning calls a "low-orbit missile.

"What astonishes me about those madhats is their ability to capture the imagination of those kids," said Cynthia Gerdes, founder of the Creative Kidstuff retail chain, whose son has been a regular at Leonardo's for five years. "That's the genius of Steve and his army of Einsteins — pulling our kids away from computers and electronic games and back into the world of creativity."

And now Jevning, 52, is targeting a new market, using his dream-and-build approach to help corporate clients promote innovative thinking and team building.

The business, which generates about \$120,000 a year in class fees and contributions but does not pay Jevning a

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To watch an audio slideshow of Leonardo's Basement, go to

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salary, is located in a 4,500-square-foot basement beneath a Minneapolis coffeehouse and ice cream plant. It is filled with an array of fascinating clutter, most of it scrap products donated by Twin Cities manufacturers.

There are wood, metal and other building materials, and hardware ranging from springs and pulleys to scrap gears and electronic testers, plus a pile of duct tape and 10 computers built by teenage students.

Oh yes, and a passel of glue guns, propane blowtorches and soldering irons

**Youngblood continues on D3 >**

## < YOUNGBLOOD FROM D1

with which to put all the stuff together.

There also are 40 sets of Legos used to make robots powered by batteries and equipped with motors, microprocessors and sensors that allow them to move objects, navigate terrain and communicate with each other.

And then there's the combustion chamber in which to create small explosions, the better to "deconstruct" some of the projects, don't you know. Did I mention that Jevning carries \$1 million in liability insurance, lest the sundry torchings and solderings and deconstructings get out of hand? Or that each class is supervised by one of 30 contract teachers — artists, engineers, science teachers and craftspeople?

In the past seven years, Jevning has nurtured the inventiveness of about 4,000 youngsters. Leonardo's Basement offers 120 five-class sessions a year that cost \$120 apiece and include eight or nine youngsters.

Among the class topics for a couple of recent sessions: Rickshaws and Chariots, Bicycle Puppets, Cartoon Animation and — my favorites — Exploding and Imploding and Medieval Physics, the latter involving building large slingshots and small catapults.

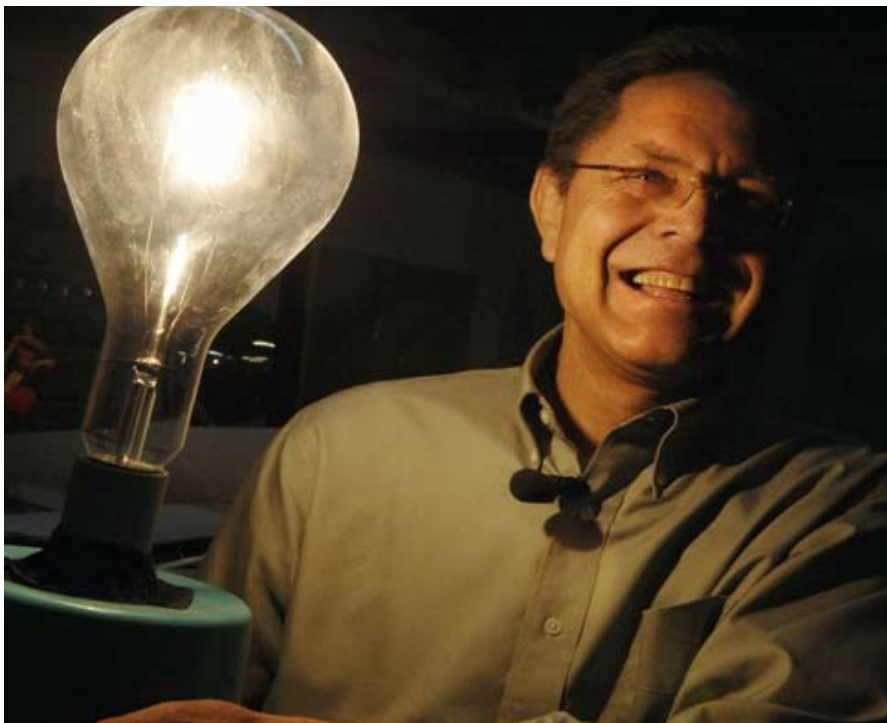
The projects the kids come up with range from vastly amusing to breathtaking. For example, one group created a high-voltage device that produced ions capable of lifting lightweight objects. Another attached a small boiler to a bicycle and turned it into a rocket powered by water and compressed air.

### Corporate clients

Now, however, Jevning is moving up the age scale to provide similar opportunities to adults, specifically to corporate clients interested in a novel approach to promoting creativity and teamwork.

It was a clever sculpture a lad made for his mother, a Target headquarters employee, that presented this new, potentially more lucrative fund-raising opportunity — and, perhaps, even a salary for Jevning.

The piece was made from a computer keyboard with all the letters removed save those spelling "Happy Mother's Day." Displayed on the mom's desk, it prompted managers to book Leonardo's for a team-building exercise aimed at



In Leonardo's Basement, which he created in 1999, Steve Jevning has nurtured the inventiveness of about 4000 youngsters. Leonardo's is a place where kids, under supervision, can create, build and even blow up their designs.

boosting communications between two related departments.

The teams chose to build an offbeat, floor-to-ceiling sculpture, later displayed at Target headquarters, made of brushed aluminum poles and birch-plywood shelves and decorated with a mobile made out of hard-drive discs and displays ranging from a pink miniature car to a two-eyed robot head.

Was it a success? Target officials won't say, but other departments reportedly are interested in trying the unusual team-building process.

Connie Rutledge, assistant director of the new-venture MBA program in the University of Minnesota's Carlson School of Management, was not so reticent about the impact of a recent Leonardo's session for 29 of her students.

"The results were beyond expectations," Rutledge said. "The level of enthusiasm was infectious, much stronger than I expected."

The upshot: She said she's planning to build Leonardo's Basement in "as a regular part of our program."

It all started with a two-passenger wooden submarine, dubbed the S.S. Sharkfin, built in 1999 by Jevning's son and some pals, who inspired Leonardo's Basement by complaining that their schoolwork didn't include enough science.

"They were itching to explore how things worked," Jevning said, not to mention "how to blow things up."

Jevning owns an education degree but never taught. Instead, he started his own company and spent 20 years designing, building and remodeling homes. But the interest in educating kids remained.

Given that he has never drawn a salary to compensate for his full-time schedule, the question is: What's putting food on the table?

"I have a loving and generous spouse" who is gainfully employed, he said.

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### LEONARDO'S BASEMENT

**Business:** Nonprofit business designed to spark the imagination of children age 6 to 16.

**Founded:** 1999

**Based:** Minneapolis

**Web:** [www.leonardosbasement.org](http://www.leonardosbasement.org)

**Executive:** Founder Steve Jevning

**Employees:** Two full-time volunteers, 30 contract teachers

**2006 revenue:** \$120,000

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