SARAH AMAZING

Challenge Them with STEAM!

The maker movement and STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts, and math) initiatives have done amazing things for teen programming. In my own experience, however, when faced with a room full of supplies and infinite possibilities, teens can feel a little overwhelmed and aren't sure where to start. They, like so many of us, often need a little inspiration to get their creative juices flowing.

I've also found that many of my teens are just not that into crafting these days, which is a shame, as the storage shelves are full of paper, beads, felt, and many, many random bits and pieces from projects long past.

ENTER: THE DIY GAMES

I must give credit where credit is due, and tell you that the idea for this program originally came from the craft store Pat Catan's, where the "Iron Crafter" competition has been held for many years. One of my teens mentioned participating, and inspiration immediately struck. A longtime fan of Food Network's *Iron Chef*, I was intrigued by the idea of announcing an event but not revealing all the details—keeping the secret ingredient from them until the night of the event. Sure enough, after spotting "The DIY Games: Superhero Edition" on our summer calendar last year, plenty of teens asked, but we reveled in the simple explanation of, "It's a craft competition. Yes, there will be prizes. No, I won't tell you what you'll have to do." They were just dying to know.

The night of the event, the vast majority of our arts and crafts supplies were gathered and carted upstairs into the meeting room, creating a pantry of supplies on a few tables in the middle of the room. Four tables were covered with plastic tablecloths, and a glue gun and a sheet of poster board of random color placed on each table. When the teens arrived at 5:00 p.m., they were divided into four teams, assigned a table, and given the challenge: Create a superhero action scene.

Parameters:

Must include both a hero and a villain

Must use at least three different materials

Must have a 3D effect

Must use entire poster board

You may change the given poster board color, but you will lose points for doing so

You must share *all* materials

You have 90 minutes to complete the task

The challenge was created to ensure that the teams had plenty of creative freedom to complete their task, and so there was enough activity for each team member to do. The teens worked so well together, instantly planning and assigning tasks to each other. They also had a lot of fun—even the snacks on the side were forgotten until I mentioned their existence. We also had a lot of fun watching them race around, helping distribute glue sticks, and baking their polymer clay and shrink film creations. A lot of different skills went into their creations, especially when it came to the 3D requirement. Each team tackled the parameters differently: some cut up old CDs, others created popsicle stick-and-clay hybrid brackets to hold up paper, while others relied on gluing down beads and stones they found amongst the supplies.

A huge mess was made by each team (which I think was part of the fun), but when time was up and they begrudgingly stopped putting finishing touches on their projects, we asked each team to put their materials back and clean up their mess as best they could. Once that was done, we approached each team and asked them to tell us: a) About the action scene; b) Who did what; and c) How they fulfilled each parameter, similar to the judging portion of *Iron Chef*. After discussion, we chose the winner (prizes were books given away in a drawing—the winning team received extra tickets), and then displayed all the projects in the teen room for the next month. The teens brought in family and bragged to friends about their creations.

We held this program another time (a *Hunger Games*-themed event, during which we invited them to create model arenas inside Baker & Taylor boxes as if they were prospective game makers), and have more programs planned in the future. These events



DIY GAMES: TEENS CREATE SUPERHERO SCENES WITH CRAFT ITEMS, *IRON CHEF* STYLE



DIY GAMES : TEENS SELECT MATERIALS FOR CREATING THEIR SUPERHERO SCENES



DIY GAMES: TEENS EMBELLISH THE BASE OF THEIR PROJECT



PROJECT RUNWAY: PARTICIPANTS POSE IN THEIR FASHION CREATIONS



PROJECT RUNWAY: TEENS DISCUSS THE POSSIBILITIES FOR THEIR PROJECT

cost nothing, using supplies you have on hand. We have been disassembling them after the events, so that much of the material can be used again. It's easy to do with a big or small crowd, but the best part is that these events really use all aspects of STEAM, as participants think through all aspects of the challenge, and they get to have a blast while they do it.

PROJECT RUNWAY

Two librarians at the Akron-Summit County Public Library in Akron, Ohio, have taken STEAM challenges in a different direction. With limited time, materials, and budgets, their *Project Runway*: Library Edition has been a highlight of each summer since 2008. Theresa Munka, teen librarian at the Fairlawn Bath Branch Library, first thought of the idea during the Metamorphosis summer reading theme. She knew she wanted to keep as many of the essential elements of the television show as possible: models and designers, a surprise challenge, and a judged runway show. Upon registration, teens choose between being a model or designer. In the first year, armed with an XXL shirt, fabric glue, hem tape, needles, and thread, designers were given two hours to create a garment while models had their hair and makeup done by volunteers. The event concluded with a runway show in the library garden, judged by the branch manager and a design student from nearby Kent State University, with an audience of friends, family, and anyone visiting the library that day.

Later, Kerry Sutherland, youth services librarian at the Ellet Branch, decided to join in the fun. Both Munka and Sutherland decide on a common material to use each year. After hosting a day of creation, the teens meet at the main library's beautiful auditorium in downtown Akron for the joint runway show.

Both librarians gather extra materials and solicit donations from staff for the teens to use throughout the year. Past materials have included button-down shirts, curtains, beach towels, and bubble wrap, and it's always fascinating to see how the teens take on each challenge.

The bottom line about this endeavor from Sutherland is, "The teens have fun, even when they don't expect to. They are very busy, sometimes a little stressed, but very proud of their work. Friendships have been forged, creativity explored, prizes shared, self-esteem boosted."

Munka adds, "Teens who hadn't met before are friends at the end of the day. And perhaps best of all, friends, family, and often, strangers applaud their work at the runway show. Originally this was going to be a one-time program, but I was immediately asked when the next one would take place. This year, I am planning my ninth *Project Runway* program." To me, that is the very definition of a successful teen program.

With these projects in mind, I challenge you to create an exciting STEAM-based competition event for your library. In whatever manner you decide to challenge your teens, remember: The craft supplies will be ever in your favor. ■

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PROJECT RUNWAY



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