

MAKETH THE CHILD

A lifelong “maker”, Lee Bennett has created a space where ideas can flourish.

It's 10.30am on a Wednesday and my nine-year-old nephew, Logan Hackett, is totally absorbed in assembling a robot with a claw at The Wellington Makerspace. We'd found the orange door on Vivian St then climbed the stairs leading up to two floors of exposed concrete walls and ceilings, institutional vinyl, and medieval-looking iron doors operated by remote control.

On the top floor, next to giant equipment drawers with labels like t.edison, i.newton and r.taylor, Logan joined eight other kids making the robot from a kit, making Play-doh figurines to scan into 3D models, making suggestions and making friends.

Makerspace's digital artist/education co-ordinator Alan Proctor-Thomson shrewdly answers questions with questions to help them work it out for themselves.

Soon, founding director Lee Bennett strides in, wearing an ear-to-ear grin. “It took 10 adults three hours to make that robot and you nearly have it working!” he says. “Pretend it's going to stop the world ending.”

The kids laugh, and step up their efforts. By 4pm, Logan's using the robot to take out the trash.

Bennett, who lives on a houseboat at Seaview Marina in Lower Hutt, emigrated from England in 2001 with partner and IT entrepreneur Marie-Claire Andrews. A lifelong “maker”,

he's taught technology in high schools, developed military-training simulators, been a navy helicopter technician, and managed industrial engineers. More recently, he worked as a prop-maker and special-effects technician at Weta Workshop, and restored World War I aircraft for Peter Jackson's company The Vintage Aviator. “That was great, but eventually I wanted to do something bigger.”

Selling the aeroplane he'd painstakingly rebuilt, Bennett sunk his life savings into co-founding The Wellington Makerspace in 2012 with mate Nick Taylor, who's since moved on. The initial aim was a workshop for members who lacked the space or equipment at home. Fast-forward a couple of years and the member-based workspace has branched out into technology education and commercial design (www.wellingtonmakerspace.com).

Although he runs adult classes and courses, Bennett's passion is teaching kids skills that may turn into careers. “Mums, dads and schools banged on our door noticing voids in their kids' technology education,” he explains. As well as school-holiday programmes, Makerspace runs after-school clubs for children aged nine to 13: Mini-Makers: Physical (think rockets, robots, action figures) and Mini-Makers: Digital (3D design, animation, designing computer games).

Bennett, 39, also teaches “maker

technologies” on location by partnering with schools, home educators, government departments, Victoria University, libraries and youth centres. Currently, he's creating “maker kits” to sell at cost. “The focus is useful, cool stuff that addresses social and environmental problems, like robots that sort trash. Let's get kids thinking entrepreneurially, and sow seeds for future Kiwi businesses.”

While the youngsters do their stuff upstairs – next to the “cockpit” that Bennett's making for a film – he shows me around the orange-themed workspace downstairs. Here, he and three staff design and make “interesting, environmentally sustainable things” for commercial clients. Projects, both physical and virtual, include a special feeding box for Forest & Bird and a crime-scene scanner that builds a three-dimensional, full-colour room model for juries.

Late last year, Bennett separated out the two sides of the business, creating a commercial agency, Ninety Design, and The Wellington Makerspace, which operates as an educational charity. He's now applying for funding, and top of his wishlist is a “Mobile Makerspace” van to take around schools that can't afford kits. “I'll take the mountain to Muhammad,” he says. “What I do is rewarding, and enough people have helped me that now I'm paying it forward.” SARAH LANG



NICOLA EDMONDS



Above: Lee Bennett. Left: Workshops for young “makers” fill the void parents see in their children's technology education.