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‘Guitars for Girls’ program growing into its own design

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Maddie Weldon, 16, drills a hole for an input jack on the bottom of her guitar.

Photo by Amber Levenhagen

The Stoughton Area School District is in the second year of a program designed to help introduce girls to STEAM (science, technology, engineering, art and math) disciplines.

And they get to build their own electric guitars.

For the second consecutive summer, a group of Stoughton girls entering grades 8-12 has the opportunity for each to build her own solid body electric guitar through the “Guitars for Girls – Amplified” program at Stoughton High School’s Fab Lab.

Stoughton High School Band director Dan Schmidt, who teaches the class, said the idea came from the Fab Lab at Fox Valley Technical College in Appleton. Last year, the district sent him there to build a guitar and get the experience needed to teach a similar course in Stoughton.

“As far as I know, we’re the only high school in Wisconsin that’s doing what they’re doing at Fox Valley Tech,” he told the Hub last week. “Last year, we just wanted to build one, and this year, it’s been moving into, ‘Now can we start to change things up a little bit?’”

In the program, which started the first week of August and will wrap up and the end of this week, students will make – from scratch – an electric guitar.

First, students select a guitar body shape and style, which is then cut out from a block of maple wood using the Fab Lab's computer-guided router. Students then use Fab Lab equipment to shape the body, attach the neck, fret the board and etch or engrave the guitar.

Schmidt admitted he's "pretty far from being a guitar guru" but said there is something "very liberating" about knowing you can build a musical instrument.

"It's totally doable," he said. "We have the tools to make that happen, and if you can do that, what else can you do?"

Building a guitar, he said, "isn't really the moral of the story."

"The moral of the story is what happens after that," he said. "Will you create an entirely new instrument that hasn't yet been thought of and write music for it and learn to play it? We're learning a little bit about acoustic and some of those Fab Lab fundamentals – will that drive you to come up with something different?"

STEAM power

Schmidt said the district has received grants from Alliant Energy to "try to bring more young women into the fold of STEAM and trying to get more young women involved in those pursuits in the Fab Lab." Last year, the class had four students; this year, there are six.

"We've especially been working with that population to try to awaken them to those possibilities," he said. "The guitar is something that is more tangible, and they can walk in and have an idea of what they want it to look like and feel like, because everybody knows that a guitar looks like."

Students put in around 40-45 hours of class time, Schmidt said, though many have taken their guitars home to keep working on them.

"It's kind of astounding in that period of time they can walk out with a guitar," he said.

Looking to grow

Though space is limited, Schmidt said he expects an even larger group next year when the applications come out in May. The group is open to students entering grades 8-12, but he hopes the class will attract younger students so they can advance.

"Having more students who aren't as old is really ideal," he said. "We want them to build a guitar and then have another class, another experience in that space or realm."

Schmidt thanks volunteers from Cummins for their ongoing support of the project, as well as Alliant Energy for its funding.

"If we didn't have that financial support, a lot of students wouldn't be able to do what we're doing," she said, "It truly takes a village to do a big thing, and we're doing a pretty big thing."