

Repair Café - Worldwide Movement to “Fix It, Don’t Toss It”

by John Wackman

Repair Café is a free community meeting place to bring a “beloved but broken” item to be fixed—for free. “Repair Coaches”—guys and gals with significant skills—make the repair while you watch...and learn...and help. In other words, this is not a drop-off service. A lot of stuff gets fixed. People leave very happy.

At last year’s NY-SAR³ conference, several of us gave a session presentation and then set up three demonstration “repair stations” at the Wednesday evening reception.

A year later, there are 24 Repair Cafes active in the Hudson Valley, Catskills and Capital region, plus Syracuse, Long Island and a variation in Buffalo, with several more in the organizing stage. Visit one in your area, or start one in your town. You’ll get lots of help.

The first Repair Café was started by Martine Postma in a theatre lobby in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. It has grown into an international movement with more than 1,600 Repair Cafes in 33 countries. The Repair Café Foundation is putting more and more emphasis on collecting data—everyone is interested in the impact this is having. In 2017, they report approx 300,000 items were saved from the “waste mountain.”

Around the world about 50,000 people go to a Repair Café every month, helped by some 21,000 volunteers. In our region, it is reasonable to estimate the number of repaired items in 2017 at 2,500 to 3,000 thanks to some 360 repair coaches & volunteers in 24 towns in 10 counties.

Martine Postma was invited to be a keynote speaker at the October ReuseConex in Cincinnati. From there she went to the Drawdown Learn weekend at Omega Institute in Rhinebeck, NY. Here is the description of her session there:

Comments from Satisfied Customers:

Wonderful hour and my vacuum works now. Whoopee!

Such nice people and dedicated, as I am, to fixing rather than throwing away. Thank you all!

As usual the fixers are pros! So grateful this service is available as I hate to see good items go into a landfill.

Repair Cafe: Creating Agency through Fixing Stuff and Strengthening Communities

In describing its vision, Project Drawdown notes that “the full range and beneficial impact of climate solutions have not been explained in a way that bridges the divide between urgency and agency.” As a result, the aspirations of people who want to enact meaningful solutions remain largely untapped. Repair Cafés - free community events that bring broken items together with expert volunteers - do more than

divert waste. They signal that we are better off when we see our own community in the midst of cooperation, creativity, and downright decency, where goals are achieved and positive outcomes realized.

Three Good Things to Know About Repair Cafes

Why We Do It

Repair Café is about these things: Extend the life of stuff you care about. Preserve & pass-on repair know-how. Get curious about the way things work. Use tools. Sit elbow-to-elbow at a work table with your neighbor. Have fun.

We say bring your “beloved but broken” item to Repair Café. A friend said, “I guess that means I shouldn’t just bring any old piece of crap.”

Hmmm. That’s sorta true. It means the item you bring should mean something to you. You’d really like to keep it. As one of our young volunteers said: If it’s broken, bring it.

So, what kind of stuff gets fixed?

Ever heard of a “Magic Quartz Cooker”? They made them in the 60s. Ellen James remembers her mother using it to broil fish year-round on the back porch (keep that fishy smell out of the house,

don'tcha know). Ellen brought it, our repair coaches put their heads together, and Ellen left impressed & happy. "Swell crowd" she wrote in our Comments book.

What else? Vacuum cleaners, CDs, radios, skirts & sweaters, chairs and lots of lamps (lamp parts are available "at cost").

Marie Young's "good old" shopping cart got a new wooden (!) wheel. Kimiko Link's daughter brought her doll baby with a smushed face. Felicia Casey at our Dolls & Stuffed Animals worktable made her feel better. Across the room, Frank is a mentor to Andrew, and they are reconfiguring laptops.

Who are the Repair Coaches?

Guys and gals with significant repair skills who volunteer their time for 4 hours on a Saturday every other month. Some run professional repair businesses—for them this is a way to get out in the community and be better known. Some are retired, with a lifetime of experience to offer. Pretty much everyone shares this trait: they all liked to take stuff apart when they were kids.

The profile of a good Repair Coach is a person who is:

- A curious troubleshooter
- A good listener
- Wants to help make the repair...but won't be frustrated if that isn't reasonable or possible.

Only one more thing to say.

What beloved but broken item will you bring to a Repair Café in your area?