



STEM Education Works®

SOUTHWEST FLORIDA
SWFLN
LIBRARY NETWORK

On any given week, a family might walk into a Southwest Florida library “just to look around” and end up driving robots, testing renewable energy kits, or exploring 3D printing. For many, it’s their first time touching that kind of technology.

“It’s really awesome that we can do this and really just continue to support STEM education,” says Amy-Jane McWilliam, Executive Director of the Southwest Florida Library Network. “It’s so important, not just in an educational environment, but even looking at career development and moving forward.”

WHO THEY ARE

SWFLN’s network reaches public, school, and academic libraries, as well as community learners across southwest Florida. That broad reach allows the organization to connect casual exploration with deeper STEM interest across many ages and settings.

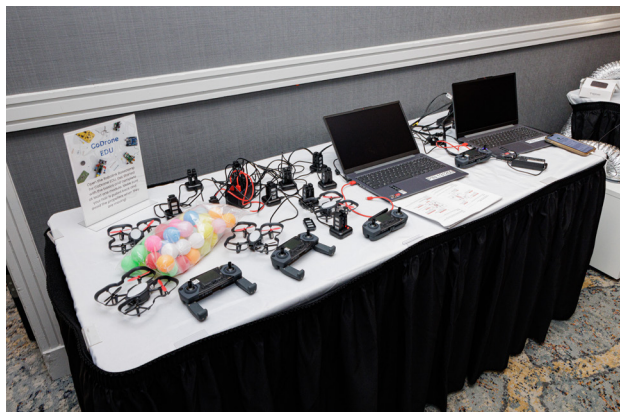
One of its most popular services is the Bits and Bytes to Borrow collection, in which SWFLN purchases STEM equipment and loans it to member libraries and schools so they can run their own programs and classroom activities.

THEIR GOALS

SWFLN wanted its STEM programming to do more than entertain for an hour and send people home. The larger goal was to help patrons discover technology, build confidence, and connect hands-on play with real-world applications and future opportunities.

Amy-Jane sees those links clearly.

“Everyone needs to know how to use equipment and to be able to start with blocks and button makers and then move on to simple coding. It’s really ... it’s awesome that we can do this and really just continue to support STEM education. It’s so important and not just in an educational environment, but even like looking at career development and moving forward.”





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THEIR SOLUTION: LOW-BARRIER STEM, EVERYWHERE

By making technologies available through libraries and schools, SWFLN created low-barrier entry points to learning in coding, robotics, 3D printing, fabrication, and renewable energy.

Instead of every library needing a permanent lab, member sites can reserve classroom sets of tools like Ozobot Evo Classroom Kits and challenge mats, Sphero RVR+ class packs and code mats, Make Wonder Dash robots, MakerBot Sketch Sprint, Glowforge Aura, Horizon DIY Fuel Cell Science Classroom Packs, and STEM Quest Activity Cards.

These experiences are reinforced through professional development and events like Makerpalooza, where librarians and educators explore emerging technologies, share ideas, and learn how to bring STEM back to their communities.

“We have a huge tech playground,” Amy-Jane says of Makerpalooza. “We have an all-day room set up where they can learn how to 3D print and fabricate with 3D printers and lasers ... It’s very inspirational. People share their stories, and you just see a lot of creativity, a lot of excitement ... It just powers you for the rest of the year.”

THE SWFLN PROGRAM: PRACTICAL STORIES, REAL IMPACT

McWilliam shared examples of the community using library technology in practical and inspiring ways, from public programs that introduce families to coding and making, to creative events that bring adults and community leaders into direct contact with STEM experiences.

At one Lee County “fandom fest,” the library checked out STEM kits so visitors could experiment:

“They checked out VR headsets, they checked out the 3D pens, Ozobots, Spheros ... so people could make their own cosplay costumes,” she recalls. “It seems the public is surprised to find some of these things in libraries because their expectation may have always been that libraries are books.”

In rural DeSoto County, a chamber of commerce meeting turned into an unexpected STEM showcase:

“You had all these businessmen and women in suits who came for this chamber meeting. And then afterward they got to play, and they said that it was the best, most fun meeting that they’ve ever had because, you know, it reminds them how joyful it is to play and discover and learn,” Amy-Jane says. “It was just a reminder of how instrumental libraries are in bringing technology into a community where maybe not everyone has the resources to access those, even the schools, even the local schools.”

Across these stories, the pattern is the same: people come for a program, try something once, and leave with a new sense of what they, and their library, can do.

PARTNERING WITH STEM EDUCATION WORKS

The SWFLN program is more than a checkout system; it is a bridge from first-touch exploration to real-world STEM pathways.

STEM Education Works supports that bridge by helping SWFLN choose technologies and training approaches that make STEM feel tangible, relevant, and achievable for a broad community audience.

As Amy-Jane puts it, “The other multi-type library cooperatives in Florida don’t necessarily do the same thing ... the folks in their areas are always like, ‘Darn it,’ because they would love to have access to the equipment that we provide to our members.”

With the right mix of tools, training, and shared vision, a weekend library visit can become the first step toward a future in STEM.