

Three Cool Passion Projects by Madisonians

Stuff our friends and neighbors do to make the city better

BY REBECCA RYAN

Have you ever heard someone say, “I love my job so much, I’d do it even if I didn’t get paid!”?

If you’re like me—a skeptical Gen Xer who’s heard 97 percent of all corporate B.S. ever uttered—you probably think, “Riiiiight.” Saying you’d do your job for free rings hollow. Like corporations that say, “Our most valuable assets are our employees.”

Recently I’ve met a few freaks ... people who really are working without getting paid. I’m not talking about your garden-variety volunteers—church ladies or the yellow shirts that box up your sausages at Bratfest. I’m talking about people who looked around our fair city, spotted an opportunity and thought, “I can fix that!”

And then did it.

These people have passion. These are their passion projects:



Greg Tracy is a computer geek who was frustrated that he couldn’t find out when his bus was coming. He knew Madison Metro had GPS on every bus, so one weekend last February, he buckled himself into his task chair and did it: he hacked together an app—SMSMyBus.com—that he could use to track his next bus. With virtually no marketing, SMSMyBus attracted 138 users in its first year. The most popular stop? #1878 at Jenifer and Ingersoll.

When I heard Greg speak at [TEDx Madtown](#) this spring, he said what so many people with passion projects feel about civic entrepreneurship: you don’t have to work for the city to make the city better. Next time you’re at Mother Fool’s (I recommend the iced coffee), check out the monitor that lists the real-time arrival estimates of all the buses headed your way. (And silently, thank Greg Tracy.)

Sector67 is the love child of **Chris Meyer**, who could be making ridiculous money in San Jose, but he’s not. He’s camped out next door to Ford’s Gym, teaching geeks, dropouts and the curious how to blow stuff up. [Sector67.org](#) is what the rest of the world knows as a hackerspace—a place you go when you want to play with the kinds of tools your dad used: lathes, presses and hand-rigged whatcha-majjggers.

Chris is smarter than you and me put together—did I mention he could be making crazy money elsewhere?—but instead of heading for greener pastures, he put his money where his heart is: in Madison.

In the process, he’s developing what I think the future of education looks like: hands-on learning that’s not book-based or butt-numbing. It’s the kind of environment where students learn by—wait for it—actually doing stuff.

Danna Olsen worked at a pharmaceutical testing lab for seven years when she quit her job on a dare. She started slinging coffee at Barriques and became a CNA with an end goal of attending UW–Madison’s School of Medicine and Public Health. On a day off from the hospital, Olsen came and took photos of what her patients see through the windows in their rooms: mostly concrete and gravel rooftop. Not exactly spirit-lifting.

So she appealed to UW Hospital’s higher-ups about installing a green roof that patients could experience. Because it helps them heal faster. (See her presentation at [greeningmadison.com](#) under “-----”)

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