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featured

## Made to order

By Sisko J. Stargazer Sun Staff Writer  
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Russ Jones donned protective eyewear to spend time with the Industrial Arts students as they worked on the shed. Photo Courtesy of David Cullison

Dr. David Cullison's Industrial Arts students at Fourth Avenue Junior High School have reached the point where the fruits of their labor are bearing even more fruits. With the help of a little seed money from the Yuma Arizona Business and Education Coalition (ABEC), students began learning how to build wooden sheds that would later be sold to keep funding the program in spring 2023.

And now, thanks to their most recent customer, community leader and businessman Russ Jones, Industrial Arts students not only learned how to build a shed with insulation and electricity, but they're also soon going to use welding equipment newly purchased with the shed's proceeds.

"Now we're starting an entire welding program over there that adds to everything else we're doing and that was from the proceeds from our sheds," Cullison said. "My goal from the beginning was ... about exposing [students] to different trades but also build as much of a self-sustaining program as possible and that's what we're going for."



Jones shared that he'd been discussing the prospect of getting a shed with his wife "for a long time."

"... she said, 'Well, unless it matches everything,' she didn't want to have it in here," he recalled. "And that was one thing so by doing it this way, I got to pick all the colors, the trim colors and I got the tile, the shingles on the top and everything. So as you can see, it pretty much matches everything around here, and she just loves the colors. She says that it's perfect."

Pointing to the shed's surroundings, Jones indicated that the shed's brown tones match the warm colors of his house and backyard facilities. But more than that, he wanted to support Fourth Avenue's middle schoolers.

"[I wanted to] encourage these young people in the trades, to learn good skills that'll be helpful throughout their lives, even if they're not in construction or in carpentry," he continued. "I took woodshop but we didn't get to build really – I got to, you know, like make a pig cutting board and I got to make shoeshine kit for myself."

"... One of the things that, to me, is impressive is that just like we ... articulate our curriculum when you go from elementary to middle school in high school, by having more diversity in programming at the middle school level, then those young folks when they go to high school and then on to junior college and the CTE programs, they're much further advanced when they go in. They can do even more advanced things before they get in."

Cullison noted that Jones' custom shed order afforded students the extra opportunity to learn how to insulate the shed and set up electricity. Throughout the five or so weeks they spent building the shed, Jones would visit the students and participate in their sessions – including the ones where an insulation specialist and an electrician came in to teach them.

Cullison commented that both he and the principal were shocked when a student who'd been really struggling in school finally got an interest when the electrician came in.

"He was absolutely on fire; he couldn't believe it," he said. "He was all in there doing everything!"

"I always say, 'We don't have a learning problem; we have an engagement problem'," commented Tom Tyree, Southwest Technical Education District of Yuma (STEDY) superintendent and Yuma ABEC partner. "[Instead of] talking about what we want to do, now we're talking about what we're doing – which is kind of the opposite of flying the plane while you're building it ... We had all these aspirations. We said, 'If we do this, we think this is going to happen. This is going to be a benefit,' you know?"

"... Well, now we're seeing the effects and we're talking about what it is that we have accomplished now, and ... I like the way that we're using data to support that as opposed to looking at things anecdotally. We've got real data to support what we're doing."

Tyree explained that there has been a study looking into whether Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs in middle school are better preparing students for high school and beyond. ABEC's middle school programs in Yuma County have been running for about four or so years, he mentioned, and from an initial 200 participating middle school students, 4,300 kids today are benefitting from the programs daily.

"It's becoming more advanced," he said. "We bought the RC cars, OK? And then we developed some curriculum to go with it. And now we have the VR headsets. Now the students are going to be able to do maintenance virtually. We bought five headsets that are specifically for car maintenance and then we have five headsets that are for career exploration."

The work to advance career exploration and CTE from both STEDY and Yuma ABEC persists, he demonstrated, but it's seen a lot come to fruition as it is. Looking forward, Tyree thinks transportation will be the next big thing to boost these efforts so that more students can be connected to the education and opportunities they need.

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