

Cool Tools Show Podcast Episode 41: Tara Tiger Brown

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Our guest this week is Tara Tiger Brown. She's the founder of the nonprofit organization LA Makerspace, the premier STEAM service provider for the Los Angeles Public Library. She's also the co-founder of Kithub, creative electronics kits for kids, and co-founder of Connected Camps, which has online camps for kids including a Minecraft coding club.

Mark Frauenfelder: Welcome to the cool tools show. I'm Mark Fraudulence, editor and chief of cool tools. A website of tool recommendations written by our readers. You can fund us at cool-tools.org. I'm joined by my co-host Kevin Kelly, found of cool tools. Hey, Kevin.

Kevin Kelly: Hey, it's great to be here.

Mark Frauenfelder: In each episode of the cool tools show, Kevin and I talk to a guest about some of his or her favorite uncommon and uncommonly good tools they think others should know about. Our guest this week is Tara Tiger Brown. She's the founder of the non-profit organization L.A Maker Space. The premier steam service provider for the Los Angeles public library. She is also the found of Kithub. Creative electronic kits for kids and co-found of Connected Camps which has online camps kids. Including a Minecraft coding club. Hey Tara, how's it going?

Tara Brown: Hi, its going great!

Mark Frauenfelder: Good. You are always like doing so many things. I can't believe how prolific you are. I've been over to L.A Maker Space and it's such a cool setup that you have there and people are so engaged. Your providing a great service to families who want to get into the making world.

Tara Brown: I know, it's awesome. How awesome all the L.A folks are and how engaged they are in making and doing stuff. It's great.

Mark Frauenfelder: Yeah, if it wasn't for you and your husband and partner and crime Shaun Bonner who is one of the co-founders of Crash Space. The other L.A hacker space. There really would not be much in the way of Maker's Spaces, hacker spaces in Los Angeles. Crazy.

Tara Brown: Yeah, I mean I think there's been a couple that have popped up since then. But, I there a more a niche. So were very proud to have spaces that are open to everybody.

Mark Frauenfelder: Yeah, thank you so much I appreciate it. Personally, being a Los Angeles resident. So Tara we have a few cool tools that you have recommended this time. Why don't we just get started with the Fujifilm Instax Share Sp-1.

Tara Brown: Absolutely. I'm petting it now as we speak. I discovered this when I ready a blog post from the national writing project. It was about hacking your notebook. I thought well that's interesting. It's essentially about including paper circuits in your notebook. I thought you know everybody has notebooks at some point in their life and I love it when people are imagining how to use something that's just sort of an everyday item.

So I recently was leading a camp in Park City and I wanted to include this idea of notebook hacking, but the kid's also very interested to include photos. So I searched around thought you know with printer paper and you know lug that all the way from Los Angeles to Utah or I could find something a little bit more mobile. That's actually where my partner in crime Shaun told me about this little beauty.

I think he first saw it maybe in Japan because he works there a lot. I think the sister product is actually a camera that prints, but I didn't want a camera, I wanted a printer. What's great about this is it's really small and portable. You can stick it in a little bag and it has a built-in wi-fi hotspot. That means that I can take my smartphone, install there app. It's the instax app I think its called, its a freebie. You take your photo or you pick photos that you already have on your I-phone or Android photo list. Even from Instagram or Facebook. You hook up to the little printer's hotspot and you print. It's so great.

So the kids at the camp were delighted with this device. In fact when something was about to print they would crowd around and they would beg to be the one that was taking the paper out or the photo out first. Then of course, it's very magical to kids right. I mean not very many kids in this day in age have seen a

Polaroid. So there like, "Wow, where's the picture, what's going on." Then all of a sudden the photo would emerge in front of their eyes and they thought that was pretty cool. So yeah, I absolutely loved it.

Kevin Kelly: So just to describe to our listeners what it is is a little white device that's I dunno, it's like a small paperback size, maybe a little bit smaller that is like a Polaroid picture printer. It ejects out a little sheet that comes out white and then within a few minutes it'll develop an image and that image was on your phone originally. So it has the wi-fi and your phone is kind of in the vicinity of this and your going to print a photograph that's on your phone, is that correct? Right. So you take a picture with the phone and then you can make a physically print of it instantly. I think that's the use case. I actually have the camera version which I use when I'm travelling in remote areas. I use it as kind of like an icebreaker and boy does that work because even though people are kind of use to seeing images on their film, I can actually give them an image that I took of them. It's just magical. In fact, you become ... They'll mob you, but its really, really a lot of fun to do it that way.

Tara Brown: I know, I had to tell the kids that they were limited to the number of printouts they could have because I mean I think it comes out to about a dollar per print. I think what's really great about that though is you think really hard about what photos that you want to print out right. So there's curation process that happens. So I thought that you know that was a good thing too. It was a learning exercise for the kids.

Kevin Kelly: So does it work that you take it from your camera roll on your phone or you can take any picture that you've taken even in the past as well?

Tara Brown: Yeah so you can take it from your photo library. You can take one you know right now instantly hooked to your Instagram or Facebook and grab photos from those apps as well. So if you've already done all your special filtering work, et cetera on Instagram you can just print those out which is great. There's actually something I just tried today which I didn't notice before and that's that I can take a photo that includes the location where I'm at, the date and time and the temperature. So I'm here in Venice and apparently it is eighty degrees out. I totally believe. So that's kind of a fun way to keep track of where you were and what it was like on that particular day.

Kevin Kelly: Cool. Yeah I can really see how this would be useful in kind of like even workshops where [inaudible 00:07:03] or your doing things. Again, you can take pictures of something in process and post them up on a wall or a board as you along.

Tara Brown: Yeah, I think that's a great prototyping tool for sure. Yeah, I think its a great prototyping tool for sure. Yeah I think there's like a lot of really fun applications for it. You know if you go back and you think now about, okay I want to print photos out which is not something that you know I don't think people really do as often anymore right. Were so use to looking at Instagram or Flicker and that sort of thing. Going back to where you know my use case was okay I wanted to find a printer where the kids can print the photos out and they could put it into a notebook that their hacking and adding electronics to. All of sudden it just turns it into something that's really special for them.

Kevin Kelly: So the one little caveat about this is that the images are not so big. They are about the size of a credit card, so you should just be aware of that. That there kind of on the smallish size.

Mark Frauenfelder: I just wanted to mention that its 150 dollars approximately for this device and you can get a good deal on film if you buy a bundle. If you buy like a 5 pack you can get it as low as about 60 cents a print. So you can get a pretty good one. The next one you have is a book called the art of tinkering.

Tara Brown: Yes, also I am petting this book. I actually discovered this on Mimi Eatos, in her office she has this book and I stole it from her because when I saw the cover of it, it says this special ink conducts electricity. Open up this book and discover how to hack it. This book is kind of like a cardboard cover I guess. There's this gear on it. It has this conductive ink around it. It just draws you in right away. If your into making and tinkering and stuff, you didn't want to put it down when you open up the cover.

How you can light up the cover, you want to dig into that. Then you turn the page and there's just full of beautiful photos of fantastic projects that people have worked on. It's chalked full of stuff that they've done at the tinkering school. At the exploratorium in San Francisco which again if your in the maker DIY world like that is the place right. You have to visit the exploratorium. Yeah, it is one of my favorite books and I have it right there on my workbench. I reference it quit often along with some of the other books I have.

This one I recommend especially if .... You know it's great if your new to tinkering I think in a lot of ways because they have really great photos of the process and then also the end result. It's not a ton of reading. It doesn't feel really technical. It all feels just like something that's really do-able. It doesn't feel like its an overwhelming process or it doesn't get into much into the weeds of how a circuit works or that sort of thing. Its really encourages you to just get started.

Kevin Kelly: Yes. I actually have the book and I highly recommend it. It's pretty broad. They have a good range of things that will appeal to people of all backgrounds and levels. Your right, it doesn't quite have like the builds that say a Make magazine would have. There more suggestive and inspirational and they'll give you a sense of the kinds of things you could do. It's sort of more a there's possibilities. Where you could start here something and then here's a way you can kind of take it further. It's not exactly like a cookbook although they have enough to get you going in the beginning.

Tara Brown: Yeah I mean there's definitely some of the beginner projects like Squishy Circuits and so forth that will give the list of ingredients, how to make the conductive playdough. You know there's [inaudible 00:11:09] route contact might switch. I referenced when I was thinking about building a hydrophone. So that got me started just understanding how contact mics work how I could easily put one together, but absolutely its really a starter. I think it encourages you to sort of see what the breadth of different products are and if then you wanted to dig in further then you can go and find more information about those projects.

Kevin Kelly: Yeah and I think it's really ideal if your running kind of a little camp or something where you want to introduce the tinkering mode and some of those skills. This book would be perfect for that.

Tara Brown: Yeah, great.

Mark Frauenfelder: Very cool. So this next one is something that sounds really interesting Tara. It's called "burner."

Tara Brown: Yes. I am an early adopter of burner app. It's a Los Angeles base start up which I am a big supporter of Los Angeles based startups. So the idea ... You may have heard of what a burner if you watched the wire or something. The idea is that its basically a throw away phone or phone number. So its something where you temporarily have a phone number and then you want to be able to get rid of it so people can't get in touch with you again.

So they made an app based around that concept. Where its this sort of privacy layer between you and the world and your actual, you know if you have an actual phone number. In the app what you do is you can have one or more of these temporary phone numbers and you can decide how long you want them to live for. You can extend them if you want to. You can burn them, get rid of them if you want to. There's a couple of different applications or use cases that I think are the most popular.

One might be that say your selling something on Craig's List and you know how you tend to get a ton of phone calls for that. So once your done selling then you can just get rid of that phone number and people can't hassle you. Recently, I was doing a bunch of research into, I was looking for a large software package and it was one of those cases where they make you give your phone number and you have to talk to them on the phone. You know there going to hassle you afterwards.

So I used it for that, where they will never find me again. You know? [inaudible 00:13:28] phone number. Yeah, its been really handy, I also recommend it. This is for my fourth pick you know we'll get into this. As a startup your always looking for cost effective ways to run your business and I find that its actually really great for just using is it as a work phone number. It doesn't cost a lot and its still right on my phone. If I'm getting a work. I know it's a work call, I can answer it and its divided from my personal number. So its been good for that.

Kevin Kelly: Is there a limit to the number of numbers you can kind of burn or do you have to pay for each number?

Tara Brown: You do. You pay for each phone number and right now they have credits. A credit will give you a certain amount of time so I think it's maybe 3 or 4 months of time. From my understanding, if they think their going to get into a subscription model. So you can just say I'll pay every month for a certain phone number. If I have a phone number I want to keep indefinitely, I have to make sure that I keep upping it so that it that it doesn't just burn on its own because I haven't paid. It's based on credits right now.

Mark Frauenfelder: It's about three or four dollars per number?

Tara Brown: Yeah I think per month. So if I get a new number, it'll cost me about that month to keep it for a month of time. Then you just keep buying more credits through the iTunes store.

Kevin Kelly: Do they recycle. They must recycle a number. Maybe when you get a new number, your getting all the problems of the person who had that number before you.

Tara Brown: If they do, I'm pretty sure its recycled so far in the future that that wouldn't be an issue. I did not hear them say that. I actually was talking to them about it yesterday because I think that would just be a real problem. They would probably would lose a lot of customers if that happened. I think they used a lot of backend platforms that provide these phone numbers to them so that

wouldn't be something that they would take care of. It would be the service layer below them.

Mark Frauenfelder: Sounds very useful for lots of different reasons.

Tara Brown: Absolutely.

Mark Frauenfelder: So we have one more from you and it's something I've never heard of before which I always love. It's called product hunt.

Tara Brown: Yeah so I mentioned before that I'm an early adopter to lots of apps. I always like to know what the new stuff is out there especially in startup land. This product hunt you know is a great discovery tool to learn what the latest and greatest is out there.

It's also something where ... When apps are discovered by different product hunt curators, you can actually vote on them. So if its something that you like or enjoy you can give it a thumbs up. So what's happened is its become this really great launching pad for a lot of startups to get attention in the marketplace. Now they also have kind of these Reddit style AMA's.

So founders can go on live chat and talk about their app and get even more exposure. I think initially it was a lot about really software based startups, but I've noticed that there is more physical goods on here now. Books and all sorts of things. I've discovered some courses that I've taken through product hunt. I was looking for some lifestyle photographs the other day and I found a whole bunch of services that helped me find that. Its really chalked full of pretty much everything you can imagine.

So the other feature on here that's really helpful is called Collections. That's where you know if there is somebody that you think does a really good job at curating. Different apps and things, follow them and then check out the different collections that they've created. That makes its a lot easier to find things that might be good for you. So like Mark Cuban. He has great books for entrepreneurs. So if that's something that your interested in and you think he has good taste then you can check out his collection.

Kevin Kelly: You might think of it kind of like a Pinterest for new products and things?

Tara Brown: Yeah. I mean its kind of like that although I think that you get invited to be able to post new products on the site. Like I was just recently I think given that access to be able to do that. They are very careful about not... Like in Pinterest, everybody could post the same photo of something where as in this case its like one instance of that app. You can add comments to it et cetera.

Kevin Kelly: Yeah its very, very good. If you go there there's a list of new things. This is a way to kind of keep current from the people who are in the trenches actually making them. It seems to me a lot of the suggestions are coming from people like yourself who are actually right at forefront of making these things and are paying attention to what's new. This is kind of a collective way to do that.

Tara Brown: Yeah, that's right. There's actually a little hack in the search bar if you put in an asterix. You'll see what the most up voted products are. So for example, para scope is way up there as being one of the top. It just gives you an idea of what the most popular ... Popular since products have started on the list bar which I'm always curious to see too. It's good.

Kevin Kelly: Yep and the AMA's they ask me anythings that they do. Actually, I did one yesterday for them on ... It was a strict AMA, ask me anything. So they're kind of trying to also widen the things that their doing with these and curating these in different ways in terms of having people talk about their favorite things. I think that's.... So there's a little bit of a community behind these lists as well.

Tara Brown: How was your experience with the AMA?

Kevin Kelly: So there's a couple things to say about that. One is in terms of the interface. It's a lot simpler than a Reddit which can be kind of complicated and the Reddit's interface is sort of not as nice as the Product Hunt. I think there's a smaller audience right now. So I actually was able to answer all the questions. Right? So that was good to actually have a little bit more deeper engagement with some of the people who are asking questions.

Tara Brown: Oh, that's interesting. I see the list went under the live on navigation on product hunt about what's coming up, but then I was like well where are the ones that have already happened? So that is where I was trying to discover that. Then I can listen to yours if it was recorded.

Kevin Kelly: Yeah, it was. I think that's something their still working on. Is how to archive these and I think they said they are going to kind of make it into a single post somehow or the other.

Tara Brown: Okay, gotcha.

Kevin Kelly: So Product Hunt is fairly new on the scene and these kinds of things are still I don't have anything to do with them. This is just my observations. Their still trying different things. They have the games, the books which they say are in beta versions. They are trying out having people do a little bit more curation.

[inaudible 00:21:05] it up a little bit more of a community around this idea of pointing to the newest, coolest things.

Tara Brown: Yeah, absolutely. I mean I know that one thing that happens is it can be really stressful for startups if somebody happens to post their startup on Product Hunt and their not quite on quite ready to really get those up votes. Because you know you really tried to get on the front page of Product Hunt by getting enough up votes to do so if you really want to take advantage of it as a marketing vehicle.

I hope that they can work on that a little bit more. I think there's actually apps or little like chrome plugins or something where you can add to your website to say, "Don't add me to Product Hunt yet, we're not ready." Yeah. So I mean yeah it hasn't been around for awhile. The [inaudible 00:21:57] I can't. You know I use it every single day. I probably spend way too much time on the site, but its been really helpful.

Kevin Kelly: Great

Mark Frauenfelder: It looks good.

Kevin Kelly: Well Tara this has been excellent. I just wanted to ask one question about connected cams. This is online cams for kids. How could people who have kids find out about connected cams so that they can maybe sign up their kids for a Mindcraft coding club which sounds really cool.

Tara Brown: Yes. So go to connectedcamps.com. Right there you'll see we have a couple of different options. We have the kid club membership. We offer a monthly membership to our safe and monitorated servers with super fun, awesome events that are happening. We have councilors on the site for the kids to work with. The after school coding camp and our first session for that starts in October. Then we also have an educator program to work with after school. There are some schools that want to be able to run Minecraft workshops or clubs in their community.

Kevin Kelly: And where are these located?

Tara Brown: Well we are virtual. We just finished up our online summer camp for the month of July. We had kids from around the world participating and it was fantastic. The ones that are ... Have our location base or in person, that's through the educator program with our partners. Like [inaudible 00:23:24] Los Angeles's public library. They run Mindcraft workshops.

Kevin Kelly: Cool

Mark Frauenfelder: That's great and also people can find out more about you and everything you do just by going to Taratigerbrown.com.

Tara Brown: Yep. Then I'm on twitter, Taratara

Mark Frauenfelder: Very nice. Like you said your an early adopter so you got a great[crosstalk 00:23:47]. You can also find links to everything that Tara talked about in our show notes at cool-tools.org. Tara thank you so much.

Kevin Kelly: Yeah it was great.

Tara Brown: Thank you guys so much. You guys are awesome. I love you guys.