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## Trumpet mouthpiece business helps Austin students show their mettle

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BY MELISSA ESPANA Staff Reporter June 15, 2014 3:54PM

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School's out at Austin Polytechnical Academy, but Zaria Tyler still has work to do. She bends over a lathe, using sandpaper to smooth and polish a spinning piece of brass.

When she's done, she takes the piece of brass into her hands and smiles at what she has created.

It's a trumpet mouthpiece, and a student-run business at Austin Polytech has been making them for three years.

"It's a big step to actually create something of your own," Zaria said. "I want to see others experience what we got to experience at such a young age."

Austin Polytech teaches engineering and manufacturing skills alongside traditional classes. Their students learn not just math and history but how to operate machinery and run a business.

The 10 students, mostly sophomores, who help run the mouthpiece business, called MECH Creations, are putting what they've learned to good use.

MECH Creations is a manufacturing co-op run with help from a nonprofit, Manufacturing Renaissance. At 15, Zaria is already a co-manager of the twice-a-week after-school program.

MECH's members learned to operate the machines at school, taking pre-engineering courses and a machine shop class.

The choice to make trumpet mouthpieces was inspired by their machine shop teacher, Pablo Varela, who plays trumpet. Varela designed the three models they make: the Solar, Pesado and Eutrepe. Each is shaped differently to produce a different sound.

Making a mouthpiece is a four-step process involving four different machines. On a recent afternoon, two students were crowded over the cutting machine, one supervising the other. Another used a shaping machine to turn a block of brass into a mouthpiece. One girl demonstrated how the engraving machine works. The Eutrepe mouthpiece, for instance, is named for the Greek goddess of music, who is engraved on the side.

The piece then went to Zaria for the final polish.

The students can produce a mouthpiece in about an hour and plan to sell them for \$50 each. Their first — and so far, only — sale was for \$30 to a school staff member whose son plays trumpet. Online prices range from a little less (\$17) to

a lot more (\$90 and up).

With so many other students also using the machines, the MECH team wasn't able to make as many mouthpieces as they would have liked. But they have big plans to expand their sales in the next school year. They'll contact local music shops to pitch their product. Any profits will be invested back into the business.

For now, the MECH team is building up their inventory; they've made 30 pieces in the past few months. Friday was the last day of school, and they plan to spend the summer creating social media pages to get the word out about their co-op.

The money isn't what matters, said Erica Swinney, program director for Manufacturing Renaissance.

"Success to them is not just about the bottom line. It's also about being able to grow and sustain MECH over the long term, so MECH can provide jobs and entrepreneurial opportunities to others like them," Swinney said.

"The fact that you have a group of African-American youth even aspiring to start a manufacturing company is something that I don't think has happened on the West Side of Chicago in generations."

Zaria said while some people her age have dreams of playing in the NBA, she wants to pursue manufacturing, and MECH has been a good stepping-stone.

"There's a lot of manufacturing jobs and a lot of people that are willing to hire you and train you and have you work for them," she said. "[MECH] gives you skills you can use not only in the co-op but in everyday life."

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