

CELEBRATING THE FABLAB:

March & April 2026

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Salt Spring Public Library assistant director Julia Wagner with Ethan Wilding of the Wilding Foundation, which has provided more than \$700,000 in funding for the library's FabLab.

SALT SPRING PUBLIC LIBRARY PROGRAM KEEPS ON GROWING

BY SALT SPRING PUBLIC LIBRARY STAFF

Five years ago, the FabLab was just a glimmer of hope and some new, unfamiliar equipment in a small, glass-walled Salt Spring Public Library space. We had two fledgling facilitators learning and helping others as they could, and some one-time funding that was coming to an end.

With too few volunteers to train staff once that initial funding ran out, there was a very real possibility the venture could fail.

What changed everything was a library visit from Ethan Wilding of the Wilding Foundation. Julia Wagner, assistant director of the Salt Spring Library, recounts the day. “We were having a launch event for the space, and the cookies from Salt Spring Cookie Co. seemed to be a bigger draw than the space itself! But then came a man on crutches who started asking questions about what it cost to run the makerspace, and about our future plans. After a bit of conversation, he remarked that this project aligned with the aims of his foundation, and it sounded like something he could fund.”

“I remember thinking . . . was this for real?” Julia laughs and shakes her head.

Over the coming weeks, Julia and Ethan met and shared ideas in the convivial, bustling atmosphere of Salt Spring Coffee. A vision took shape: workshops and regular programming exploring STEAM topics, making the library a central hub for collaboration, discovery and creation. The driving philosophy was that anyone on the island, regardless of which school they went to, what socio-economic background they came from, or what their experience was, could come to the library and have access to design, coding, robotics and more.

That shared vision quickly became practice. Soon, Lego Robotics and VEX robotics, video game programming, software workshops, STEM Challenge class trips and more were happening every week. Mini

campus involving introductory drone piloting, circuitry and 3D printing pens sprouted up. Word got out. Registrations were full and, often-times, waitlisted.

The statistics paint a picture of a community resource that is thriving, and still growing. Comparing 2025 to the previous year:

- » FabLab appointments: 1,112 (up 24%)
- » FabLab drop-ins: 3,639 (up 79%)
- » FabLab booking rate: 97%
- » STEAM program attendance: 1,057 (up 71%)

Staff hours in our small space increased to full-time operation, six days per week. We attracted talented new people, and appointment bookings rose to 80 to 100 per cent of capacity. We invested in faster, higher-quality equipment to expand our capabilities and meet growing demand. Even with these additions, appointment availability is often a month out, meaning we have room to improve access.

“We want to respond to the things that matter to our community,” says Wagner. “Individuals and families clearly love the FabLab, with interest regularly outstripping availability. It’s amazing to have a program this successful, and several key library metrics have jumped thanks to its success, but we don’t want people to be frustrated because they can’t get in. That’s why expanding our investment in the FabLab is such a priority.”

Stories from the Community

Besides the statistics, the library regularly receives feedback about what the FabLab has meant to islanders:

“The FabLab is a very special place for my neurodivergent child and for our community in general. It’s not lost on me how lucky we are to have this amazing resource and support from Matt and Callum! They are so great with kids and it’s always the highlight of our week.”

“We book our granddaughter in for a session every time she visits now. She loves using the 3D pens and has become more sophisticated in their use. She and her friends love the experience.”

“It was fun to collaborate on the design before the item was printed. On another visit, I appreciated the time and encouragement given to my young grandson as he was learning to use a small piece of equipment.”

“We love the FabLab! The facilitators are amazing, skilled and knowledgeable, but more importantly they are welcoming, supportive and encouraging of my kids when they come with a million questions and boundless enthusiasm!”

Looking Ahead

While the majority of FabLab programs and workshops have been youth-focused, the library hopes to add more initiatives that support adult creatives in the coming years. Textiles, music, leatherwork, and industrial and costume design are a few areas the team hopes to develop further.

The establishment and ongoing success of the FabLab has been made possible through the generous support of the Wilding Foundation, which has provided over \$700,000 in funding over the past five years and continues to invest in the lab’s growth.

“The goal,” says Wagner, “is to achieve a balance that optimizes both access and program offerings, ensuring that everyone who wants to participate has the opportunity to do so. We want people to feel like this space is truly theirs.”

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