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HEAVY Metal

The Steel Yard is all cleaned up and ready for new beginnings

By Alyssa Smith | Photography by Jonathan Beller



IT STARTED with two guys' love for metal. Not the head-banging, raise your fists kind. Actual malleable, elemental metal.

Clay Rockefeller and Nicholas Bauta got together back in 2002 to create the Providence Steel Yard. The two bought what was once a historical industrial relic located on the Woonasquatucket River, the Providence Steel and Iron Site, hoping to maintain its authenticity and use it as a functioning place for industrial work and arts. As the surrounding areas were being turned into strip malls and other chains, Rockefeller and his team wanted to try to save this piece of property. With the establishment of their nonprofit through private investment, the Woonasquatucket Community Build (better known simply as

the Steel Yard), the founders were able to raise the necessary funds to establish and begin building on the site.

They had the vision, but who could rein in these two young dreamers and make the Steel Yard a reality? The boys looked for some womanly power and found their Executive Director in Drake Patten, a former archaeologist and leader of the Rhode Island Council for the Humanities from 1999-2004. Also an artist, Patten believed in the Steel Yard's mission, deciding she wanted to take on the endeavor of turning the space into an industrial arts oasis. Patten says she thought she could make the site happen because, "if a belief isn't legitimate, it will fail."

From its humble beginnings and meager budget of under \$100,000, the

Steel Yard has grown and become a place for artists, hobbyists and working youth to learn, create and collaborate. The team grew to include five additional staff members, and the site began to attract more and more artists and their projects. Under Patten's leadership, the site and the organization have taught classes, rented studio space to artists, hosted events like the art carnival Woolly Fair, provided a home for the nonprofit bike advocacy project Recycle-A-Bike, and of course put out tangible work of their own. The Steel Yard has received national attention, garnering requests from places as far away as California to commission projects by its team of artists and craftspeople.

As the popularity grew, Patten says

she and the team made a decision to work locally. The Steel Yard created a Public Projects department overseen by coordinator Howie Sneider, in which local artists looking for work created one-of-a-kind street amenities such as bike racks, trashcans and tree guards that can now be seen all over the city. (Just look for the Steel Yard's pincers logo on a public trashcan on your street.) The project has given major support to local artists while also creating something unique for southern New England.

From the get-go, the Steel Yard also maintained a great interest in teaching young people the skills they can use for a future career. Many students from area high schools like The Met and the Paul Cuffee School have been taking part in



regular work-force development programs that teach different mediums of the industrial arts. The organization also hosts a competitive camp called Camp Metalhead, in which students are taught metalworking skills, work with a client, and create a piece of work.

In 2010, the U.S. was short 200,000 welders, and because many students have looked to white-collar and high-tech jobs, this kind of skilled manual labor has been overlooked, leaving high-paying welding jobs in the area for the taking. The mission of the Steel Yard has been to revitalize the industrial arts while also remaining locally run. Patten explains the trade as a lost art, and that like language, "if you don't keep teaching it, it will be gone."

As the Steel Yard is on a site that's been identified as a brown field, the team had to decide how to deal with the issue in a way that fit their mission. Patten said they didn't want to just build over the site or move the contaminated soil to another area, but from the time they bought Providence Steel and Iron, they knew they had to do something to clean up the land. "It wasn't just about doing a construction project, it was about rising to the challenge," Patten says.

The organization was resourceful and aggressive, receiving a \$200,000 grant from the Rhode Island Economic Development Corporation, and \$400,000 from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. The remaining money was from donors and fellow believers in the Steel Yard's mission. "We had a sense of agility, a willingness, and a capacity to adapt to Rhode Island and the economic climate," Patten declares.

With those funds, the Steel Yard sought out the help of Klopfer Martin Design Group to create the master plan, and Catalano Construction group to set up the landscape. It was when they began to design and evaluate what exactly the organization did that Patten and the team realized: the Steel Yard did *everything*.

They had big plans, wanting open space for markets, a semi-public park, and collaboration with the one-acre, for-profit plot of adjacent land at 1 Sims Avenue owned by Rockefeller and Bauta, which the two plan to turn into a restaurant.

The team chose a layout that fit with the mission but also the desired scale of

their site. Permeable pavement was put down, creating a means for storm water to be absorbed while also keeping it from the nearby wastewater treatment plant. The team also wanted a good deal of green space, and with the help of volunteers, the Steel Yard planted a variety of wild grass in the center of the yard and trees friendly to birds around the outskirts of the site, which would double as a way to handle rain and act as a gathering point for the public. Finally, the plans had to deal with sustaining large truck traffic. After all, many of the installations created by artists who maintain studios at the site were large, heavy and needed to be handled with care. A large portion of the area was capped with foundation, making sure the design was still in mind. The team is now on its last leg of the project, and will be creating a flat pad made out of shipping containers, a resourceful solution that keeps the space open and available for the building of more artist's studios.

Patten and her staff have a lot they'd like to see happen at the Steel Yard, and now that this project is near completion, they will be able to make the space more available for not just artists, but also the public. Patten says they want to host events that make sense with what goes on at the Steel Yard. If it's artistically driven, it will happen. Patten hopes this space will provide a chance for artists to showcase their work, and eventually become a kind of marketplace, similar to a farmer's market. The Steel Yard will also be reintroducing the outdoor movies they used to host.

While the site is in full operation, this is a kind of soft opening. The next Iron Chef Build-Off - an annual event modeled on the TV cooking competition of the same name, in which sculptors compete in building a sculpture using a "secret ingredient" and theme - will most likely serve as the grand opening for the new Steel Yard - complete with a steel ribbon cutting.

In the past nine months, great transition and development has allowed the site to evolve into a space that the executive director and her team are quite proud of, proving that you can keep your vision while remaining local. Patten summarizes, "I'm excited to see what will blossom, and I'm not talking about the plants." **PM**