

Originally published Sunday, June 29, 2008 at 12:00 AM

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Seattle Free School offers variety of lessons at no cost

Seattle Free School focuses on community education by enlisting volunteers to teach others about their passions — at no charge — at public meeting places around the city.

By **Jeff Raderstrong**
Seattle Times staff reporter

Jessica Dally wanted it understood: Don't put a cheese cloth in the washing machine. It will come out covered in lint and cat hair. Bad ingredients for mozzarella.

Her audience scribbled down this tip as she stirred the pot of cream in front of her. She was stalling for time, waiting for the cream to curdle and offered another bit of advice: Don't buy a cheese press.

"Until you really get into cheese making, just use what you have," she said. Like a book, maybe.

Such is the Seattle Free School. It has no sign, no building, but operates all over the city, mostly in library meeting rooms. On a recent night, about 15 people gathered in the basement of the University District Library for a lesson on how to make mascarpone. This is one of seven Free School classes Dally teaches, including "Soap Making," "Getting Your Irish Citizenship" and "Keeping Chickens in the City." All free.

"We don't collect any money from anybody, ever," even donations, said Dally, one of the school's founders.

The Seattle Free School's first class was in March. Its student body consists of anyone who shows up, all looking for an opportunity to learn from community members. Teachers — none of whom are professional instructors — offer classes based on their own interests and expertise. Dally's recent cheese class, for instance, wrapped up with an impromptu how-to on tiramisu. Irish citizenship? Another of her interests.

All teachers donate their time and equipment for the classes. So far, the only expense for the Seattle Free School has been \$10 for Web-site registration.

"[The school] gives folks an opportunity to share experience and trade local knowledge, instead of the traditional paying of professors," said Micah Anderson, who attended the cheese-making class and wants to teach a Free School knitting class.

In the four months it has existed, the Free School has amassed a mailing list of about 430 people. Most classes usually have at least 10 people, of a range of ages and backgrounds; Dally says the biggest class was about 50. She teaches most of the classes, but there are seven other "facilitators," as teachers are called.

Dally, 35, was inspired to create the Seattle Free School when she saw a flier for the Olympia Free School on a trip down to Portland. She contacted school organizers, and they put her in touch with another Seattleite interested in Free Schools, Dani Scar, and together they created the Seattle Free School.

The Free School movement in the United States started in the 1960s as an alternative to institutionalized education for children, but adult-education organizations like the Seattle Free School and the Olympia Free School have slowly gained popularity.

Many schools are associated with anarchist movements. The term "Free School" originated not from the lack of currency exchange, but from the idea that children should be "free from constraints of the traditional education system," said Bhawin Suchak, co-director and teacher at the Albany Free School in New York, which teaches 3- to 14-year-olds and is one of the oldest in the country. It does require tuition, though on a sliding scale.

Seattle Free School

Information and a calendar of upcoming classes: www.seattlefreeschool.org. Ideas for new classes are welcome.

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Founders say the Seattle Free School is not associated with any movement, anarchist or otherwise. Scar, 20, is a member of the Seattle-based anarchist collective, Team Victory, but she said that does not influence the Free School's mission.

"We identify politically in our individual lives, but we don't bring that to the Free School," Scar said.

For Dally, whose day job is a help-desk technician at a local nonprofit, the Seattle Free School isn't even about teaching. "The biggest thing that motivates me about the Free School doesn't have anything to do with teaching. It's seeing how much people are willing to give," she said. "Seeing what can be done without the traditional means of doing it."

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