



BUILDING A FIX-IT CULTURE ONE ITEM AT A TIME

Repair is cheaper and better for the environment than buying a new product. So why is it so difficult? A group of Yukoners is changing that.

By Karen McCall
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whatever they want and work alongside capable volunteers to fix it. Clusiau's background in carpentry, fine arts, and innovation lends itself to troubleshooting and fixing almost anything, but more importantly, she loves a challenge and is passionate about normalizing repair and building a culture around it.

"I really believe that we should be able to repair [the products] we're investing in," she says, referring to the right-to-repair movement that's gaining momentum in Canada and elsewhere. It means if you own a product, you have the right to repair or modify it as you wish. That sounds obvious, but manufacturers use mechanisms like copy-right and patent laws to make it difficult, if not impossible, to repair items like laptops, smartphones, auto parts, and even farming equipment. Proprietary screws and excessive amounts of glue are also used to make the inner workings of devices hard to access on things like blenders and other kitchen appliances. It's a good thing that Repair Café volunteers don't shy away from a challenge.

More than a dozen people huddle in small groups in the brightly lit Yukon-struct wood shop. On one workbench, two people pull apart a Shop-Vac. On another, a woman applies patches to her rubber boots and glues a broken dish back together. Nearby, a man uses a multimeter to measure the electric current (or lack of) in a clock radio.

Although bringing in one item for repair is the norm, Myrna Bruns received permission to bring a truckload's worth tonight, including lamps, hair dryers, a carpet cleaner, and a DVD player. The Whitehorse Community Thrift Store volunteer gets items tested and fixed before they go up for sale. Bruns says the dollar value of the item doesn't matter, as long as someone can use and appreciate it.

"I can't throw things out," she says, explaining how she grew up knowing the importance of repair. A café volunteer gets Bruns' blender whirling to life and she lets out a "woo hoo" and raises her fist in the air.

"I love that sound!" she cries. According to repaircafe.org, an umbrella organization for repair events around the world, there are 35 Repair Cafés in Canada alone. The Yukonstruct café operates independently, but with a similar vision of bringing people together to repair items. There are many volunteers in addition to Clusiau and Piwowar, with a wide range of skills from welding and electronics to sewing and wood-working. One thing they all share is some degree of doggedness. They make use of the makerspace's wide selection of tools and parts, including soldering irons, sewing machines, 3-D printers, and laser cutters. Best yet, they provide their services for cheap, asking just \$5 to cover material costs.

"If you have any more problems with your machine, don't call me. Just go buy a new one."

Those were the parting words of an appliance repairperson who had just spent an hour wrestling with my washing machine, sending grunts and curses echoing up the hallway.

"These aren't made to be fixed," he told me as he disassembled the appliance in question. Online sources say washing machines should last to 14 years, but in his experience, it's more like three to seven. By that wisdom, my washing machine is well into middle age, explaining the WHAM WHAM WHAM it makes during the spin cycle, shaking the entire upper floor of my house. After finally locating and lubing the bearings, which, he told me, used to be a lot easier to access, he packed up his tools and told me, politely, not to call back.

Michelle Clusiau also knows firsthand that manufacturers don't make items with repair in mind, but that doesn't stop her from trying to fix them and mostly succeeding. Determination and curiosity have led her to fix her own dishwasher, dryer, and milk foamer, as well as countless items for other people. Clusiau, along with engineer Glenn Piwowar, are the backbone of a monthly repair event held at the Yukonstruct makerspace, in Whitehorse. The Repair Café invites people to bring

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On the other side of the wood shop from Bruins, Mark Nelson gathers a space heater into his arms. The switch broke, and he tried finding a replacement for it locally—no luck. He ordered one online, but it didn't fit. He persisted, with what he called "don't send it to the dump" determination, and ordered a different switch online. It fit and tonight a volunteer helped install it.

"Victory!" Nelson exclaims, smiling. The heater, which sat idle in his basement awaiting repair for months, will again be of use.

At another café, another breakthrough, this time for me. Volunteer Nicky Rosenberg examined my lifeless 4 kg e-bike battery, quickly deducing it had a blown fuse. He sent me to Canadian Tire to buy a new fuse, but they didn't have the right size. I returned to Yukonstruct, dejected, but Rosenberg wasn't deterred. "Come," he instructed, leading me to a stack of computer boards. He rummaged through them until he found one with a fuse the right size. He plucked it off the board, inserted it into the battery, and voila. Rosenberg's ingenuity saved me \$549, the cost of a replacement battery. I was over the moon when I powered up my e-bike the next day.

These are the types of success stories Chusiau has seen at every Repair Café since they launched, in 2014. In addition to the thrill she gets from diagnosing the how, what, and when of an item she's helping fix, Chusiau gets a lot of satisfaction from connecting with people who come in for help.

"The thing that excites me is empowering people," she says.

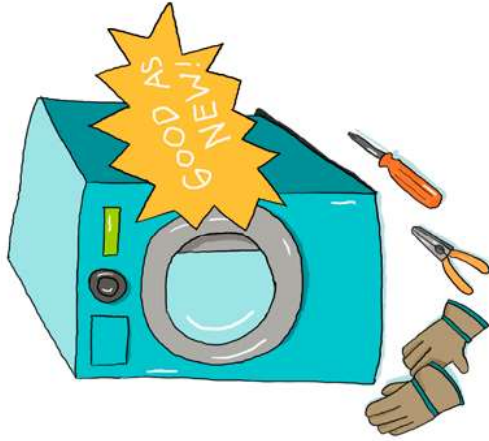
Chusiau sees many of the usual suspects week in and out. Kitchen appliances, like coffee makers, toasters, and blenders, are common, as is sporting equipment, like headlamps. It's no wonder she's developed a discerning consumer eye. She doesn't like buying new things, but when she does, she looks at the quality and design. "I will pay more for things made with better materials and easier to repair."

There's optimism that repair could get easier for some items. The federal government is moving to extend the life of home appliances by requiring manufacturers to supply repair manuals and spare parts and amending the *Copyright Act* to allow for the repair of digital devices and systems. As

well, it's committing to introduce a tax credit to help with the cost of repairs performed by technicians. South of the border, the U.S. Federal Trade Commission voted in July to ramp up enforcement against repair restrictions preventing consumers and small businesses from fixing their own products. And, in November, Apple announced it will allow customers to do their own repairs on its new phones and Mac computers for the first time.

"These moves are a step in the right direction. Because for Chusiau and others, fixing things just makes sense.

"It's better for the planet, it's better for ourselves, it's better for our community," she says. **Y**



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OTHER REPAIR RESOURCES

repaircafe.org:
Find a Repair Café close to you.

cfst.ca:
Computers for Schools Yukon is part of a national program that collects, repairs, and refurbishes donated computers and distributes them, free, to schools and other organizations.

ifixit.com:
Repair guides, kits, and forums.
canrepair.ca:
Repair advocacy organization.

ABOUT YUKONSTRUCT'S REPAIR CAFÉ

HISTORY:
Started in 2014.

WHY:
Repair items and learn new skills with others.

WHEN:
6–9 pm on the last Thursday of every month.

COST:
\$5 donation (free for Yukonstruct members).

STRANGEST ITEM BROUGHT TO AN EVENT:
Geiger counter (measures radioactivity).
yukonstruct.com/event/repair-cafe