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## Jennie Graham-Henderson teaches Columbians to upcycle

Eco Chic Studio turns disposable materials into repurposed art

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Repainted vintage chairs surround work tables, bugs made of old jar lids line the shelves, and benches made from wooden pallets fill the space that Jennie Graham-Henderson has repurposed into Eco Chic Studio.

Graham-Henderson specializes in the green art form of upcycling — “making something that would have otherwise been thrown away or not used anymore into something functional and attractive again,” she says.

Eco Chic Studio, located in the Catacombs Gallery of Artlandish Gallery, opened on April 19. Graham-Henderson offers open studio hours during which people can participate in upcycling projects. She also rents the studio as a venue for birthday parties and bridal and baby showers.

Partly because of the success of the online Etsy store she started two years ago where she sold upcycled art projects such as repurposed jewelry and baby shoes, Graham-Henderson decided to open Eco Chic Studio. She had also been using her home as her studio, and she was ready to unclutter the space. “When this space opened up, I called dibs,” she says.

Her mother, Mary Johnson-Gerard, who assists at the studio, says Graham-Henderson has been resourceful and artistic since she was 7. “She was making earrings and necklaces and selling them at an antiques store in town,” Johnson-Gerard says. “She sold enough to buy herself a leather jacket.”

Graham-Henderson says she originally planned to make the studio for adults, but she encountered customers who were wary of being artistic because of reservations they had about what constitutes “art.” “There is a huge spectrum now of what qualifies as art,” she says. “I like people to feel confident and proud of themselves that they have created something out of something else.”

With her guidance, Graham-Henderson has helped adults see that they can be artistic while still living sustainably. Her friend and customer Kendra Baxter says Graham-Henderson played a major role in the beginning of Baxter’s own upcycling. “Jennie opened my eyes to the possibilities of reusing,” Baxter says.

Baxter sees the studio as a jewel of art and reusability, especially for children. “Implanting that idea into the youth of Columbia will work wonders on the world as they grow up,” she says.

When Creative Days Art Studio closed, Graham-Henderson began focusing her studio efforts on children. Because she was friends with the owners of the studio, she was able to take on their younger clientele and prepare for summer programs.

Eco Chic Studio now offers summer camps and classes that teach kids from first through fourth grade about

upcycling and being resourceful and sustainable.

For each week, Graham-Henderson has planned a different theme, which in some way revolves around upcycling. Students will participate in different art projects and work with her to finish a major one. From paper art to marble tracks, Graham-Henderson will show kids that they can create beautiful things. “Kids, especially, love this stuff,” she says. “Kids live in their imaginations, so this is just fun.”

Johnson-Gerard says she knew that Graham-Henderson would offer something for the children of Columbia, especially given Graham-Henderson’s background as a teacher. “That’s what she hopes this place will be — more of a teaching studio than a gallery,” Johnson-Gerard says.

Working with the kids and seeing how parents have reacted to the art projects, Graham-Henderson is beginning to see the adults change their minds about their own artistic abilities. “I just want people to know (art) is not as daunting or out of reach as some feel it is,” she says.