

COMMUNITY

CHOPPER
SHOPAn Interview with Pedro Portillo
on Workshop Houston

WORKSHOP HOUSTON CO-FOUNDERS SETH CAPRON, KATY GOODMAN, BENJY MASON, AND ZACH MOSER RUN FIVE WORKSHOPS IN HOUSTON'S THIRD WARD. ONE OF THESE IS "THE CHOPPER SHOP," WHERE STUDENTS LEARN TO DESIGN AND BUILD THEIR OWN BIKES, USING SALVAGED PARTS. IN LATE OCTOBER, HANNAH GAMBLE SAT DOWN WITH PEDRO PORTILLO, AGE 13, TO LEARN MORE ABOUT HIS EXPERIENCE WITH WORKSHOP HOUSTON.

HANNAH GAMBLE: What made you want to join Workshop Houston?

PEDRO PORTILLO: It was Reginald [Hatter] and Benjy [Mason]—they came [to my school] and showed us pictures of the bikes and talked a little bit about what happens around [them] and what they build and what they make...that kids design their own bikes. I never knew that kids could actually use tools like professionals...the same tools people use to make buildings.

HG: Which tools do you use?

PP: Well, we use a torch...and there's this machine called a blaster—it's inside a glass box-type shape, and you put your hands inside (there are gloves), and this little gun that sprays some strong air and takes all the paint off of the bikes...

HG: You spend almost all of your afternoons at Workshop Houston—do you feel as if you're sacrificing certain things to be here?

PP: Well, sometimes I miss playing with my little brothers at home...and I also miss playing my video games. But every time I come here, it changes me a little bit, so I feel good about it.

HG: How are you changing?

PP: My teachers say my improvements are that I don't talk a lot and that I get my work done. Before I knew this place existed, I would do things I'm not supposed to.

HG: Like what?

PP: [At my house] there's a big TV with two speakers on the side, and I was [always] trying to poke holes in them with my pen...But a couple weeks ago, instead of poking holes in the speakers, I was reading a book. When my mom saw me, she thought she was dreaming!

HG: Tell me about the last bike you completed. What aspects of your design are different from the other bikes you've seen at Workshop Houston?

PP: I designed a chopper with a fork that was T-shaped instead of curved. It's supposed to be able to handle more weight that way. And most frames I had seen before were curved on the bottom and the top, but mine is straight, at more of an angle.

HG: How did the bike turn out?

PP: Well, when I came here over the summer, I was riding it, and my mom said it looked like it was wobbly. So I had my brother ride it around so I could look at it, and I saw that the place where the fork connects to the head-tube was shaking and starting to bend.

HG: What was going on?

PP: When I looked at it real close, I could see that there was a place [where] I hadn't welded it strong enough; I hadn't put enough copper on it. I had to take the bike apart. I'm going to have to re-weld it and use a lot more copper this time. I'll have to unbend it, too. And I'm going to add a sidecar.

HG: A sidecar? Has anyone at Workshop Houston

ever done that before?

PP: No, they said I was the first one. And that's just very cool. Maybe somebody else will be interested in making a sidecar now.

HG: Do you have someone in mind you hope will ride in your sidecar?

PP: I was thinking about my sister and her dog. They always like to be together, riding on things. I don't know if dogs like that, but...

HG: I think lots of dogs like going fast. What kinds of things are you thinking about as you make plans for the sidecar?

PP: I have to decide how to make it big enough without being too heavy, and I have to decide where to put it. I'll probably put it on the side without the chain, because then if the chain ever breaks, it will be easier to get in there and fix it.

HG: In all your time at Workshop Houston, have you ever wanted to quit?

PP: There was a time when I welded two metals together, like two parts of the bike together, at an obtuse angle, and I didn't do it right—that was a time I thought I wanted to quit.

HG: But someone talked you out of it?

PP: Yeah, Matt [Southerland] gave me some good advice. He told me not to quit and that these kinds of things happen. And he helped me—he fixed the mistake I did—so I realized I wasn't going to quit...It wasn't worth it.

HG: What has been your proudest moment here at Workshop Houston?

PP: When I finished my bike and got to ride it in the Art Car Parade. People kept telling me to get off my bike because they wanted to ride it.