Way before the curtain call, way before the lights dim, long before the memorized lines and the final dress rehearsal, the Visitation Tech Crew, full of 40 students of disparate ages and skill levels, is faced with an empty stage and a challenge: the students must take the stacks of 2x4s, 4x4s, and thin, wide pieces of plywood, take the power tools, hammers, safety glasses, screwdrivers and clamps, wrenches, buckets of various sized screws, take the needles and thread, the paint and canvas, the lights and the Genie Lift, and with mental and physical prowess (and about eight weeks), make something.
“We just put a hammer in their hands and they learn by doing, and in learning by doing, they find out they can do more,” says David Nastal, Director of Performing Arts.

Maker spaces, which are big rooms designed to encourage people to create things with their hands, are becoming trendy and popping up in schools across the country. (In fact, Visitation’s proposed Berchmans Hall will have its own.) But in a way, an empty stage full of tools is sort of the original maker space. With very little training and a lot of independence, students need to figure out what they want to build and how they want to build it.

“Tech Crew helps students step out of their comfort zones, and when they do that, it helps yield much more creative approaches to any particular problem-solving occasion,” says Maurya Scanlon ’06, Technical Director.

And the varied skills they learn apply to far more than just the one show in front of them. “Tech teaches the girls geometry, it teaches them how to work with their hands, how to make intelligent decisions, how to handle a power tool without being intimidated, how to plan their time appropriately. These are basically life skills,” says David.

The Tech Crew spends entire weekends working on the sets for months leading up to the show. This fall at a tech Saturday for “The Curious Savage,” a group of girls worked together to attach two linked chains from the stage ceiling to the top of a 10-foot-tall bookcase. Three girls rode up in the Genie Lift while others below held onto the bookcase, nudging and guiding it into place.

“Before I joined Tech, I had never picked up a power tool before. I didn’t know what to do with a table saw. I didn’t know how to screw something into a piece of wood. I didn’t know what the word ‘flush’ meant. Now I know all of those things,” says Fior Cecchi-Rivas ’20.

The fall show was the first time that Grace Murphy ’20 worked on Tech Crew. “I had no experience at all with anything mechanical,” she says. “I’d never even touched a tool, but now I feel more confident around that stuff and I can fix things around the house more.”

What’s more empowering than knowledge? The tech girls gain the confidence to slice a 4x4 with a power saw, grab the right screwdriver for the job, correctly measure the wood that will eventually make a bookcase, shine a light perfectly on a dancing cast.

Megan Munter ’17 joined Tech Crew as a freshman and now works on hanging and pointing 20 to 30 lights on the catwalk, plus another 30 smaller lights over the stage. She and her lighting team decide where the lights shine and what colors they show. She has learned “critical thinking and engineering skills,” she says—and the ability to “see the big picture.”

Erin Shaheen ’18, who has worked on Tech Crew for three years, calls it “empowering. There’s no girl in the world who doesn’t want to be holding a hammer and hitting something heavy every once in a while.” Erin, who was head of lights this fall, has also learned a lot about physics, creative problem solving, leadership, and dealing with pressure.

Keeping cool under pressure is another key Tech Crew skill. When the curtain goes up, David and Maurya are both in the audience, watching from afar. Anything that goes wrong onstage is solely the students’ problem. And things do go
Wrong at times. One show recently, a circuit was tripped and the stage went black. The Tech Crew had to figure out what happened and fix it, fast. (They did.) Another time, the whole lighting board went dark. Again, cue the techies. Figure it out. (And they did again.)

“They have to know how to make it work and they need to make it look professional. They are constantly thinking on their feet,” says David. “It’s a skill that will come in handy later in life, no matter what they do.”

Teamwork & Friendship

Working together on a common goal that requires learning new skills, troubleshooting, and physical strength creates a Tech Crew bond that is especially strong.

Unlike some area schools that allow co-ed crews, Visitation’s is strictly all-girls.

“We are all strong, but we don’t have the physical strength a boy our age might, so we have to work together more to solve problems... So that has given me a lot of confidence,” says Lyla Ward ’17.

Emily Clancy ’19 checked out some YouTube videos at tech Saturday and then set to task, sewing together part of the backdrop using (for the first time) a sewing machine.

“I have found that even when I’m not successful, there are people who are able to help me. So it gives me the confidence that even if I do screw up something I can always find somebody to help me or I can try again and be better,” she says.

The older girls with more tech experience are expected to lead. “The construction of a set requires a whole lot of teamwork,” says Maurya, who graduated from NYU’s prestigious Tisch School of the Arts and has worked in technical theater in New York City. “We have established a hierarchy, so they are also learning how to manage a project, manage a team, develop the underclassmen. By the time they leave as seniors, we hope they have a little taste of management.” Now, Maurya feels that working with the students is a way for her to give back to the next generation of strong women.

There’s no girl in the world who doesn’t want to be holding a hammer and hitting something heavy every once in a while.

Erin Shaheen ’18

“They give us a lot of responsibility,” says Fior. “We plan out the set and have free reign.”

The result of all this teamwork is not just a beautiful set and show; it’s friendships that will last beyond Visitation.

“I consider Visi Tech my second home,” says Erin. “I call these people my second family. I have made friendships with kids outside my grade level. There are girls here who are like sisters to me.”

Beyond Visitation

Macy Rupp ’16 joined Tech Crew on a whim her freshman year at Visitation. She is now pursuing a degree in lighting design and technical direction at California Institute of the Arts. Though Macy didn’t feel she was the strongest in Visitation’s classrooms, she really found her niche in Tech Crew. “Every aspect of tech includes color theory, design aspects and composition, safety, carpentry, knowing materials. I was never good at math, but I found I had an eye in the theater,” she says. “Tech Crew was the ultimate proof of your work at Visi. You can get an ‘A+’ on a test, but it’s different when you have to apply knowledge to real life. Tech was my confidence boost where I thought, ‘OK, maybe I can go somewhere with this.’”

Some of the girls on Tech now, like Megan, hope to pursue careers in science or engineering. Others, like Lyla, plan on pursuing liberal arts. But whatever the girls pursue, the skills they develop in Tech Crew are transferable to whatever profession or life situation they find themselves in. And that’s empowering.

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| With long hours spent problem-solving together, “Techies” become great friends—like this group from fall 2016’s “The Curious Savage.” A student frames out part of the “Mary Poppins” set in winter 2016. Members of the “Dark Side” like Virginia Kane ’18 draw on a variety of creative skills, including painting. Cassia Torczen ’16 focuses lights. Elizabeth Hofer ’14 has some fun getting into character as Stage Manager of the 2014 musical “Babes in Arms.” Techies enjoy the opportunity to use power tools—and develop impressive skills, too. Katherine Fink’ 18 practices her own “stagemcraft.” Students change out lights for each show.
| CENTER |
| Madison Lee ’16 hints at the serious fun to be found behind the scenes of Visi’s productions. |

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT WHAT TECH CREW IS LIKE, VISIT www.visi.org/techcrew!