

In Conversation with Anita Perr

Keviin Shah, Declan Gunn, and Cole Neufield are Teen Thinkers at the Bard Graduate Center. They spoke with Anita Perr, an occupational therapist who works at the New York University Ability Project on July 23, 2019. Below is an excerpt from their interview.

Location: New York University Occupational Therapy Department, New York City

Audio Excerpt #1:

Keviin Shah: This field seems like it obviously helps a lot of people, so what advice would you give to young people like us to become involved in human centered design?

Anita Perr: I think keep your eyes open. Just look when you are using things, and think about how you would have changed it if you built it for you, and what would be the process of making something so that it is adaptable. Cellphones have a lot of technology built into them, so you can customize it to yourself, but lots of other machinery does not and so paying attention to that sort of thing, and why the designer decided to put a button there, or why is it so small. The writing is really little. What happens if I couldn't read it. I would not be able to know which buttons to push and so I think thinking about that is really important. Then I think also just making stuff, so cardboard, paper, glue, whatever you have, just start making things, and then move on to whether its 3D printing or laser cutting or whatever kind of fabrication you are doing, just keep doing it and get better and better. There's also meetups all over the city for makers and so you can get connected with other people who make stuff and learn things. There's also big projects. There's a group at Al Dupont. They're in Delaware, and they started this program where they build little motorized cars for kids with disabilities who are too young, maybe for their own power wheelchair or haven't started yet, but if you get somebody in a car and get them to move it on their own, that idea of being able to mobilize yourself on your own first time can be life changing, so if you get involved in stuff like that through your school, or have a club that does that sort of things, or robotics or whatever it is, thinking about how you can make things better for other people, I think, is the way to go.

Audio Excerpt #2:

Keviin: It is great that all these products are being made, and people are really being catered to, but I am sure there has to be some challenges with that too. So one object that I was looking at was this Liftware spoon, which helps people who have hand tremors

and Parkinson's disease, to stabilize their food, so it doesn't go flying off their spoon, and it is a great product. It really does help certain people who have this kind of issue of tremors, so this device is definitely a necessity, but it is a little bit expensive. The spoon is almost \$200, and attachments are almost \$40, so, in general, what kinds of steps should be taken to make any kind of product for this market and many other more accessible to the general public. Is it possible? What other challenges do you face in designing products for differently abled people besides this financial aspect of it

Anita: It all comes down to finances, and it's too bad. The problem, or part of the problem, is I don't know everything, but in my head part of the problem is that the population is so small, so if you think about, I don't even know how many people there are with Parkinson's, but of those people with Parkinson's, how many have difficulty feeding? How many does that spoon work for? You have this teeny tiny group of people who could benefit from this and the research and the years and years of work that went into developing it, in order to pay for that, the spoon has to be \$200 or whatever they say it is, whereas if it's something the whole population uses, then the price comes down.