Gert Garman inspires creative problem-solving and ‘disruptive thinking’ at Valencia’s new Collaborative Design Center.

By Susan Frith

The chairs have been rolled into a corner at Valencia’s Collaborative Design Center. Two dozen leaders from the Continuing Education division stand in a circle and wait to see what their new colleague—the one with the spiky red hair and contagious energy—is going to do with the football she’s holding.

That’s Marifrances “Gert” Garman. She’s the center’s director and their guide for a day of strategic planning.

On this late November morning, they have the place to themselves—an 11,000-square-foot facility on Valencia’s West Campus with floor-to-ceiling windows, walls to write on, jazz playing on the sound system and movable furniture. All of it has been designed to promote creative thinking. Over the next several hours, the team members will brainstorm ideas and focus on how to meet certain challenges.

But first, Garman tells them, it’s time to play.

Innovative thinking

Completed in early 2013, the Collaborative Design Center is the brainchild of Valencia President Sandy Shugart. He envisioned “a place where we could really change and grow the culture of the college from the inside out, as well as grow the capacity of our community to solve problems in creative ways,” explains Amy Bosley, Valencia’s interim vice president for human resources and diversity. Bosley worked to ensure that Shugart’s vision was carried out during the center’s construction. Everything about the space is supposed to communicate “limitless possibilities,” she says.

In addition to hosting a variety of groups from all of Valencia’s campuses, the center and its dynamic new director are reaching out to local nonprofits and businesses.
“Seventy percent of my job is changing the culture on campuses, working with internal groups to help them think a little differently,” says Garman, “and 30 percent of my job will be bringing in different groups from the community. They get the space for the day and me as a facilitator.”

But the center is not a place for business-as-usual meetings. It’s meant for innovation, planning and creative problem-solving, plus a little improv theater. (But we’ll get to that later.)

Just as an accordion contracts and expands to make music, creative problem-solving involves moving back and forth between two modes of thinking: convergent (focused) and divergent (expansive, sky’s-the-limit). Both are essential, Garman says.

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“A couple of professors seeking to change their classroom dynamics have visited the center for inspiration, Garman says. “I told them, ‘In order to get (your students) to not sit in the same places, buy some modular furniture. Every time you have a class, move it around. Shake things up.”

“When it’s time to brainstorm,” says Garman, “we go over here.” She opens the door to one of the center’s three design studios and points out the industrial furniture. Every time you have a class, move it around. Shake things up.

“Setting a new course
Press open the thick glass doors to the center and you leave the day-to-day world behind, entering a space that’s expansive, filled with light, and, with its rough-hewn surfaces and nautical lines, built to look like an unfinished ship.

“When you come in here, you are navigating new waters,” explains Garman, who joined the center this fall. “It’s an unfinished ship, because design work and ideating are never quite done,” she says. “That’s why we always say, ‘You can date an idea, but you can’t marry it. It’s going to morph; it’s going to change.”

Groups typically start and end the day in the center’s large Compass Room or adjoining Navigation Lounge. These rooms are where participants work as an entire group to identify problems and goals and later put together an action plan.

In the Compass Room, octagonal tables filled with light, and, with its rough-hewn surfaces and nautical lines, built to look like an unfinished ship. The center is the perfect place to reflect, invent, and the center’s various spaces help enable this process.

According to Bosley, not only will the faculty and staff who come here benefit from what they learn, but “they’ll be able to run their classrooms and their departments this way. So students will ultimately benefit from their having this experience and learning to problem-solve in a new way.”

Similarly, business and nonprofit leaders who train at the center can take those tools back into the larger community.

The center already has facilitated a brainstorming session for Darden and Goodwill. Garman says it will offer its services to more organizations in the coming year.

According to Pamela Nabon, Workforce Central Florida’s president and chief executive officer, “Valencia’s invigorating Collaborative Design Center was the perfect venue to host our board’s strategic retreat. It was both relaxing and stimulating, making our event even better than we envisioned. It is the perfect place to reflect, invent, collaborate, brainstorm and create.”
Want to be more creative? It starts with an attitude

Gert Garman keeps a purple feather boa in her new office at Valencia’s Collaborative Design Center. It’s a souvenir from her Disney days, when she assumed a sunglasses-toting persona known as Gigi Fabulous. “I made Gigi Fabulous pretty famous all over the world,” she says, and we suspect she’s only half kidding. Though not everyone has Garman’s improvisational flair for the flamboyant, you can still achieve the right mindset for creative problem-solving. “There’s the doing of the creative process,” she explains. “That’s the brainstorming. There’s also the being, cultivating the right attitude and an openness to allow new ideas to surface. I think the being actually eats the doing for you.”

According to Garman, a few important attitudes are involved in creative thinking and problem-solving. Here are some simple tips for incorporating them into your own life.

Freshness
• Take a new route to work.
• Order something different for lunch.
• Talk to children about a challenge and see how they would solve the problem.
• Buy yourself a magazine you would not ordinarily read and make yourself look through it. “At Disney we would buy magazines for each other when we traveled,” Garman says. “It was really funny. I think I got Log Cabin Monthly one time. It’s not going to get you to an idea, but it could stimulate something that could get you to an idea.”

Curiosity
• Ask lots of questions. “Little kids ask why 47 times because they get a stronger answer,” Garman says. “So keep asking why.”
• Listen, and don’t judge ideas ahead of time.

Playfulness
• Instead of being so crazy-busy you can’t think, just add that light touch” to your life, Garman recommends.
• Play music you enjoy.
• Try a ropes course or another activity. “I don’t know if bungee jumping will get you in a playful mood,” Garman says. “It will probably frighten you more than anything. But do things that stimulate you.”

“Playfulness
• Crouching down to a kid’s-eye level, one team member says: “I help people who want to study in the U.S. and don’t live here make lots of friends.” As a child, she wanted to be a counselor. “I help teachers teach grown-ups how to learn new skills so they can get jobs and take care of their families,” says a colleague who wanted to be a firefighter. From a once-aspiring model: “I help students who want to take in the bad guys in the world, and also the firefighters who want to fight fires.”


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“Playfulness
• Turn out’s that no scrimmage this morning, but Garman’s got a few instructions for her Continuing Education students who want to take in the bad guys in the world, and also the firefighters who want to fight fires.”


“Gert understands where we’re trying to go, and she helps us get there in some unconventional ways. But beyond that, she can help us to go places we didn’t even think we could go.”

“To learn about each other,” one person suggests. “To build a team,” says another.

Garman affirms all those answers. “To pay attention. To create energy. Yes! Now what happened when someone dropped the ball?”

“They picked it up and kept going,” Garman nods. “It’s the same thing with innovation, you guys.”

Joe Battista, the Continuing Education division’s chief operating officer, takes a break during the day to underscore the importance of the center and Garman’s role as a facilitator. “The college has gotten so much larger,” Battista says. “It’s getting very diverse over a fairly large region, so we need this type of space where groups can come together and be creative, and maybe refine a process, or develop new things.

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