

DEPT. OF HOBBYISTS
UP IN THE AIR

One recent Saturday morning, in a suburb of Washington, D.C., an eight-year-old boy named Ethan Manners and his father, José (“as in table manners,” the father said), arrived at a party whose invitation read “Do you want to build your own drone?” The Manners contingent was undecided. “We’re in watch-and-learn mode,” José said, explaining that he and Ethan were drawn by the mission of the party’s hosts—the D.C. Area Drone User Group—to promote “the use of flying robots for recreational, humanitarian, and artistic purposes.” Before they invested in their own drone kit, made in China (and available online for around three hundred and twenty-six dollars), they wanted to observe. “Moving from building Legos to drones—it’s like making the switch from the N.C.A.A. to the N.B.A.,” José said.

By 11 A.M., two dozen men were seated at two long tables. Ken Druce, forty-seven, who flew Blackhawk helicopters in Iraq and, more recently, piloted a recreational drone over his father-in-law’s Christmas-tree farm to check for thirsty spots, stood in the front of the room. “Let me tell you a secret of dronemaking,” he said. “An Altoids box is your best friend. It’ll help you hold all these little tiny parts.” The participants began unpacking their soldering guns and hobby knives. Among their ranks were a retired F.B.I. agent (“I was in a prison riot in Louisiana once, and, boy, could we have used a drone”), a wedding photographer (“Imagine a shot of the whole reception from way up above, in some historical location”), and an architect (“We could fly over a big field where we might want to build and have movie-trailer-quality idea sessions with the footage”).

The drone party was held in a “Makerspace” called Nova Labs, in Reston, Virginia. In the foyer, a sign asked “Did You Make Something Neato?” Nirvana’s “Come as You Are” played from speakers. As they worked, the drone buffs

discussed the imminent Senate hearing on “The Future of Drones in America.” Matt Fleck, the architect, acknowledged feeling “very uncomfortable” with the Obama Administration’s use of Predator drones to kill alleged terrorists, as well as some civilians, in Yemen and Pakistan. “It’s extrajudicial,” he said. Christopher Vo, a grad student in computer science and the group’s director of education,



paused while delivering a soldering lesson. “The other day, people were protesting at C.I.A. headquarters with signs that said ‘Drones Kill Babies,’” he said. “We want to show how drones can be used for things like anti-poaching efforts and surveying disaster sites to help find victims.”

Druce added that flying robots are value neutral: “You can use them for spying on Britney Spears sunbathing by her swimming pool, or for solving major world problems.”

Jim Kellner, a bespectacled ecologist, looked decidedly nonlethal as he hunched over his four-rotor drone, which resembled a giant tarantula. Kellner intended to use his drone “for remote sensing” in the rain forests of Panama, where he planned to fly it among more than two hundred species of birds and fifty types of bat. “A drone is substantially cheaper than manned aircraft,” he said.

Rich Goodwyn, a defense contractor with blond hair and a Buzz Lightyear jawline, said that he hoped his drone would help get his lacrosse-player son into college. “Recruiters don’t come to high-school games anymore,” he said. “What you have to do is make your own five-minute video.... I thought I could

get some amazing shots from up above.”

Others were looking to make money, aware that by 2015 the Federal Aviation Administration plans to allow the use of commercial drones in U.S. airspace. “Holy crap! It’s a huge business opportunity,” Druce said. He’s hatching a business plan to monitor the Keystone XL Pipeline—“I would love to zip along, seeing if there are any problems, showing them a live feed.”

At three o’clock, Vo gave Druce a sly smile. “Wanna fly?” he asked, and the two men ran out to the parking lot, drones in hand.

Using a remote control, Vo sent his vehicle whizzing skyward, then let it hover directly above a red Ford truck. “It has a lot of thrust,” he said.

Druce’s drone, equipped with sonar, did not take flight but wobbled on the pavement like a drunken Jabberwock. He didn’t mind. “I love this stuff,” he said. “I mean, really, drones are cool!”

Inside, the sombre discussion continued. Fleck worried about “moronic” hobbyists breaking safety rules, like the guy who sent his drone dangerously close to J.F.K. airspace last month. “This could ruin it for everyone,” he said.

Jerry Richards, the retired F.B.I. agent, acknowledged that drones could easily turn into a version of Big Brother in the sky. “But if you’re going to regulate drones, then regulate binoculars,” he said.

At the end of the afternoon, eight-year-old Ethan and his father declared their intention to order a drone kit. Ethan had listened intently, but declined to weigh in on the debate. “It’s very complicated,” he said. “I think it will be easier when I’m ten.”

—Sarah Stillman