

The Mercury News

MercuryNews.com

Cassidy: Little things can spark a kid's passion

By Mike Cassidy
Mercury News Columnist

Posted: 08/20/2009 12:35:36 PM PDT

Updated: 08/20/2009 04:19:48 PM PDT

- [More Mike Cassidy columns](#)

Who really knows what's going to light a kid up?

Who knows what pursuit, what diversion, what adult-conjured pastime is going to open his eyes, broaden his perspective, get him thinking that, hey, maybe there's a bigger purpose in life?

This being Silicon Valley, we often go for technology. Couldn't hurt to teach a kid about computers and software and the digital world, right? At the very least, maybe he can go down to the local global corporation and get a job.

So, it made sense earlier this decade when the nonprofit developer Eden Housing, with the help of grants and other nonprofits, started Digital

Connectors at Eden Palms apartments in San Jose and at other affordable housing developments in the Bay Area.

But the program was never about turning kids from poor families into the next golden geeks. Instead, it's been about showing teenagers they can accomplish things, and that there is a world beyond what they deal with every day.

"It instilled in me a sort of volunteer mindset," says Quoc-Sy Nguyen, 21, who graduated from the first Digital Connectors class at Eden Palms in the summer of 2003. "It gave me the motivation to basically step beyond myself and know I should go out after opportunities."

It was a little thing in that program that sparked a desire to help others, Nguyen says. He and his four or so Digital Connectors classmates launched a project to provide Eden Palms residents with tech support and computer repair. The gratitude from residents was an eye-opener.

Nguyen was talking to me last week in the Eden Palms community room, the same place he'd spoken the night before to the 2009 graduates of Digital

The Mercury News

MercuryNews.com

Connectors. It was a small class — 10 students — who'd spent a few hours a day, three days a week, in the communal computer lab.

Sure, it's only 10 kids. But multiply that by programs throughout the valley — programs at Boys & Girls Clubs and YMCAs and schools and churches — that aspire to turn kids into successful young men and women. As kids throughout the county return to school, multiply the 10 by the number of special teachers out there who have that precious ability to turn a kid's life around or turn a struggling student into an eager learner.

Some of it's luck. Some of it is determination on the part of the child. But it happens.

As for Nguyen, he graduated in May from the University of California-Berkeley with a degree in integrative biology. He's in the midst of applying to 32 medical schools. And he's recently back from a 16-day trip to Vietnam, during which he volunteered with teams of local doctors to provide health care to poor villages that have almost no access to medical help.

Nguyen and his family moved from Vietnam when he was 5. They moved into

Eden Palms 12 years ago. His father was a laborer in restaurants and supermarkets. His mother worked retail jobs. They didn't have much, Nguyen says, but his trip to Vietnam put his life in perspective.

"When I got there, and I saw everything, it affected me a lot," he says.

He was particularly moved by a children's shelter the medical volunteers visited. Nguyen says the kids there slept 10 to a room on straw mats and that they lived on dollars a day.

"I'd been given the opportunity to come to the United States," he says, "and these kids didn't have anything."

The experience has him thinking that someday he'd like to help solve health problems in the developing world.

It's all a long way from the small computer lab at Eden Palms, where he started with Digital Connectors six summers ago. But there is no doubt that one step led to the next and to what is to come.

As Nguyen waits to hear whether and where he will start medical school next

The Mercury News

MercuryNews.com

year, he plans to take a few more courses. He might volunteer at a hospital. And, oh, one more thing:

He's applied for a part-time job helping with a Digital Connectors after-school program that will start in the fall at Eden Palms.

Because you never know what's going to light a kid up.

Contact Mike Cassidy at mcassidy@mercurynews.com or 408-920-5536. Follow him on twitter at twitter.com/mikecassidy .