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Low-income Antioch teens get hands-on computer training

By Rowena Coetsee
Contra Costa Times

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ANTIOCH — Nine young people in a low-income housing development here collected their official kudos this week after completing a hands-on computer course that could open doors for them in the future.

Ranging in age from 14 to 18, these young residents of downtown's Rivertown Place and West Rivertown apartments spent little more than two months exploring the inner workings of computers, and they were recognized Thursday for their accomplishment.

At the graduation ceremony, they received certificates of completion, video cameras and a \$250 stipend intended to make up for the time they spent in the housing development's two computer labs when they could have been working at part-time jobs.

Dubbed "Digital Connectors," the program is a project of Eden Housing, the Hayward-based nonprofit agency that built and manages the 97 units on I and West Fourth streets.

The organization began providing the annual tutorials in 2003 after pairing up with a national nonprofit group that promotes technology

education in low-income communities.

Eden Housing introduced the opportunity that year to five youths living in its San Jose housing complex, and since has expanded it to all four of its properties in Livermore, East Palo Alto and Antioch, where the average annual income of those in the Rivertown Place and West Rivertown apartments is \$27,532 and \$28,402, respectively.

The free instruction lasts about eight to 10 weeks and is available to young people ages 11 to 19, who don't need any previous computer experience.

In return, they're expected to extend a helping hand by volunteering five hours in the computer labs teaching other residents the ropes as well as troubleshooting problems that they're having with their own computers.

Leading the charge was trainer Kelly Edmunds, Eden's manager of computer-assisted education, who began in September by pulling out a box of computer parts and introducing students to a motherboard, hard drive and other basic components.

From there, the teens began practicing taking a computer completely apart and reassembling it. Wielding screwdrivers, they removed CD-ROM drives and memory cards, as well as sound, video and network interface cards to see how the parts connected.

Most of their families don't own a computer, Edmunds said, and although some are savvy when it comes to using the Internet, they hadn't studied the innards of a computer before.

That was the case with 18-year-old Mikaella

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McLeod, whose technical know-how when she signed up for her first session last summer was limited to surfing the Internet and doing homework using Microsoft Word.

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By the time the class was over, however, she had acquired additional practical information, including learning about the most common viruses, which websites to avoid, and what software can minimize the risk of infection.

McLeod enrolled again in the fall, and with the rest of the group built a machine from scratch using new parts before applying those skills to nine older personal computers that Eden Housing had donated to the cause.

After checking them for problems, students installed more memory along with an updated operating system and took the refurbished units home.

"I came out with useful skills that would look good on an application for a job," said McLeod, a freshman at Los Medanos College. "Even if I don't do anything further (with computers), it would at least look good ... that I know how to do certain things."

In addition to bringing together youths from different ethnic backgrounds, Edmunds thinks participants gained a confidence that will serve them well regardless of what career path they choose.

"(Rebuilding computers) gets them to take something that seems almost undoable in the beginning and get to the point where they see that it can be done, and they can take that to other areas of their lives," he said.

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