



mikecassidy
in my opinion

Computer class opens a world of possibilities

So I'm sitting in the slick computer lab at the Eden Palms Apartments watching this kid who is just beaming, I mean throwing off a glow, as she makes a video to show off what she and her classmates know.

"I'll do it one more time," Ismahan Chire, 14, practically shouts after one take of her explaining what a hard drive is. "I'm in the zone. I'm in it. I'm in it."

The whole room is in the zone. Ten kids who've spent a chunk of their summer taking apart computers and more importantly putting them back together. At first glance, the class, called Digital Connectors, seems to be about opening up computers.

But it turns out it's about opening up a lot of things – possibilities, people's minds, neighbor's hearts.

The Eden Palms kids are not kids who start life's 100-yard dash on the 50-yard line. The tidy apartment complex on Monterey Road in San Jose was built to provide homes for those who couldn't otherwise afford a place to live in Silicon Valley. Some students are immigrants. Some of their families are struggling. They could make plenty of excuses, but excuses don't interest them.

They'd rather make their way and bring their neighbors with them.

Connecting with kids

I'm sometimes skeptical of programs that promise to solve big problems through technology. You know the pitch: Give a kid a computer. Change the world. But learning computer skills is only a starting point in the Digital Connectors program.

The course is sponsored by Eden Housing, a non-profit affordable-housing developer, which has been tweaking the curriculum for five years. Wells Fargo helps pay for the program, which offers teenagers 25 hours of classes over the summer.

The program is small, but growing. This summer, 30 students will complete the course at affordable-housing complexes in Livermore, East Palo Alto and San Jose. The San Jose students live at Eden Palms and Ohlone Chynoweth Commons.

They spend summer afternoons learning about a computer's innards - hard drive, CD drive, RAM, video card, sound card, power supplies, motherboard. They study binary code and the concepts of the Internet. Upon graduation, they're paid a \$500 stipend. And they are expected to take what they learn and help their neighbors - everything from simple repairs to showing the technophobic how e-mail works.

Using skills learned

"We went door to door," said Quoc-Sy Nguyen, 19, who graduated from the program in 2004. "We did a lot of maintenance of computers. A lot of people, they don't know how to use computers. They overload it with a bunch of junk and it slows it down."

The work says to a kid that you're part of a community. It says you can tackle the complicated. You can make a difference. It says don't listen to those who say immigrants or those who struggle financially aren't bright and valuable human beings.

"It's proving that wrong," said Jennifer Reed of Eden Housing.

The kids are certainly proving it wrong. Nguyen is a third-year premed student at the University of California-Berkeley. He may have some company in the profession from this year's Digital Connectors class.

"I want to be a pediatrician," Ismahan, who lives with her mother at Ohlone, told me after her video cameo. "I like working with kids."

Bethany Abraham, 15, thinks she'll be a doctor, too. And 16-year-old Yacoub Moussa? Yeah, doctor. Or maybe lawyer. Or teacher. The class has him thinking there is no limit to what he is able to do.

"It kind of broadens your horizons," Moussa, 16, said.

Oh, and that film the students were making? It will be shown Thursday night during a graduation ceremony for the Eden Palms Digital Connectors class. These students are moving on to bigger things.

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