CARVER STUDENTS LOOK TO THE FUTURE

Community College Initiative Connects Vernon-Central Youth with 21st Century Careers at Technology Career Expo

Saturday, April 26th, a determined group of 15 volunteers descended on Carver Middle School in the South Los Angeles community of Vernon-Central loaded down with the tools of their trade -- a monster truck, video equipment, rockets, robots and lots of computers. These technology professionals were on a mission to spark the career aspirations of 200 Carver students towards a wide array of 21st century jobs. This 60 minute “career blitz” was a critical first step in giving the students of this impoverished neighborhood hope that they have a place in the regional and global marketplace while simultaneously building L.A.’s skilled workforce of tomorrow.

“Without specific intervention, Carver students will not be included in the next wave of prosperity in Los Angeles,” states REDI Director Dr. Denise Fairchild. “Just two months ago, eight people, among them five Carver Middle School students, were shot at a city bus stop in Vernon-Central just as school was letting out. We know that this violence is linked to the dire economic prospects that young people face in this drastically underserved neighborhood. It is our intention through REDI to saturate the community with educational opportunities and training and build a direct pipeline to jobs in the new economy.” LA Trade-Tech and its non-profit community development partner, the Community Development Technologies Center (CDTech) are joined in this effort by five major funders -- Bank of America, California Emerging Technology Fund (CETF), City of Los Angeles, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and the United Way of Greater Los Angeles.

Evelyn Wesley, Carver principal, has committed the school’s leadership, faculty and facilities to ensure that Carver students are the first to benefit from these programs and educational opportunities. And, the students are enthusiastic. Over 90% gave the Career Expo a “thumbs up.” Nearly a quarter responded that they “…want to do this career” and another 60% indicated that they were interested in the career they experienced.

Student comments indicate a hunger to learn more – “I would like to try a website when you come back,” “I want to create a [video] game nobody has made,” “I can draw now and build buildings.”

The Expo was organized into 14 workshops with 15-20 students each. The volunteer presenters shared their personal stories on finding their own career paths in technology and then provided the students with an interactive demonstration of at least one aspect of that career. The workshops included demonstrations on video editing, automotive technology, graphic design and illustration, web design, video game design, robotics, computer troubleshooting, architecture, CAD-designed rocketry, fashion design, social services and radio hosting.

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The video editing workshop was conducted in Spanish to enable students in the English Language class to fully participate in the Expo. They were very excited that their workshop presenter, J.R. Lizarraga, was from a well-known family in the banda music industry. They were also able to use the new Mac laptops purchased through grant funds provided by CETF to the CD TechLink Center, CD Tech’s 40-station, state-of-the-art technology center located just three blocks from Carver in the heart of Vernon-Central.

Two of the presenters, Marcus Fairchild and Neil Johnson, attend high school at the California Academy of Math and Science in Carson. Their workshop explored CAD-designed rocketry where they stressed the importance of education in this field. They encouraged interested students to take college-level classes in science and math at LA Trade-Tech to earn college credit and learn advanced applications. Several students noted on their evaluations that they wanted to take classes at the college. As follow up, Ms. Wesley is organizing a field trip to LA Trade-Tech and CD Tech is linking students to the 21st Century Program, a middle school intercession program on the Trade-Tech campus.

One of the classes offered through the 21st Century Program is robotics. Julio Guzman, a teacher at Bellflower High School, provided the students in his workshop with a live demonstration of a “robot mouse.” He stressed that technicians and engineers with robotics education and training are in high demand in LA’s technology-based businesses.

USC’s Engineering Writing Class has provided CD Tech with six project teams over the past 12 months to conduct research on expanding technology access, applications and assistance in Vernon-Central using the CD TechLink Center and Carver Middle School. Many of the USC students have expressed a desire to stay involved with the community and two of them – Kyle Wheeler and Ivona Edry – presented workshops on architecture and video game design respectively. To the delight of the Carver students, Ivona provided them with their first exposure to the Wii and walked them through the steps of creating a video game.

Many of the students commented that it was important to hear from presenters who had grown up in communities like Vernon-Central and had faced many of the same life challenges that the students are experiencing. It was clear from their evaluations that Carver students need role models who understand them.

Last week, a Carver counselor who learned about CD TechLink Center at the Career Expo, drove one of his students over to the Center. He introduced the student to the staff and encouraged him to participate in the ongoing programs that prepare youth for technology careers and help them build their community’s technology capacity. This simple act of taking the time to open a door for a student who didn’t know how to open it himself is how Los Angeles will build its 21st century skilled workforce – one South LA youth at a time.

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