

PROGRAM CONNECTS INNER-CITY YOUTH TO TECHNOLOGY

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A multi-faceted program is helping young people from economically struggling areas to increase their technological skills and share what they learn with their families and communities.

Young participants showcased their technological talents during an event at the United Way Center in Miami on Monday, June 28.

The program, Comcast Digital Connectors (CDC), is a collaboration between the cable giant, One Economy and Elevate Miami.

One Economy is a global nonprofit organization that provides access to technology and information to low-income people. The city of Miami created Elevate Miami to help its residents improve their technology skills. It provides computers to low-income families, and operates centers that offer computer instruction to the elderly.

Miami's CDC initiative is one of 22 in the country that benefited from a \$1.2 million donation from the Comcast Foundation.

Launched last summer, the programs work with groups of young people, ages 14 to 21, from diverse, low-income backgrounds. The programs are available in both after-school and summer training programs. One Economy provides the curriculum.

The training, which is heavy on technology, also includes leadership principles, real-world learning opportunities, digital technology skills development, community service, financial literacy and civic journalism.

Both of Nicole Crooks' teenage sons are enrolled in the Miami CDC.

Joshua, 16, and Jamil, 15, students at the Young Men's Preparatory Academy, learned about CDC from their Big Brother/Big Sister case manager. The boys have been involved in that mentoring program since they were in elementary school, each with his own Big Brother. Crooks said both boys enjoy CDC, but Joshua is especially immersed in it.

"He absolutely loves it. He wants to own his own IT firm, so this is right down his alley. He thrives on being able to share his knowledge," Crooks said.

Sharing their knowledge is a key aspect of the program. In addition to helping others through their community service requirements, CDC participants are encouraged to help their family and friends as well.

Crooks, a single mother who also has a four-year-old daughter, said her sons have given her a "renewed desire" to enhance her computer skills.

"Sometimes I can be a slow learner, they're able to show me different websites and different things that they've done," said Crooks, a University of Miami social worker.

Already a computer buff, Joshua said CDC has helped him get even better, especially with "trouble shooting hardware and software problems on the computer and the infrastructure."

In each CDC location, participants work in teams, two to three times per week at their local school or

community center, and volunteer at community-based organizations, senior centers or schools.

The Miami group spends two days a week at the Jose Marti community center in Little Havana.

Jeannie Hernandez, Comcast's director of community investment, said the program received about 45 to 50 applications, and 25 students between 14 and 18 years old were selected to participate.

"Of those 25, 14 are active," she said.

All of the students will receive net books when they graduate in September, courtesy of Comcast.

In addition to learning how to network computer labs, connect wireless access points, and create video documentaries, the students also spent time on the set of a cable TV talk show, where they learned about the roles of the cast and crew.

The program also includes instruction in entrepreneurship, healthy living, career and character development and practical living skills. Among those skills are learning how to balance a checkbook, and using social media in a responsible way.

"Making sure that with Facebook and Twitter, you're not putting things that could potentially put you at risk," Hernandez explained.

Rey Ramsey, CEO of One Economy, said his organization "was founded on the belief that there is a nexus between the quality of the information people receive and their quality of life. Comcast Digital Connectors is all about connecting young people and their communities to information that's essential to improving their lives."

As much as he enjoys all things computers, Joshua, who plans to attend Ohio State University, said the biggest lesson he has learned from CDC had nothing to do with technology.

The lesson, he said, was this: "Always be genuine and nice, even if you're frustrated."

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Photo courtesy of Comcast. Participants in the Comcast Digital Connectors program discuss a Flip camera with Comcast representative Filemon Lopez, left.