The South Los Angeles Report
Covering South Central, Compton, Inglewood, Watts and beyond

Home » Community » Digital Divide

Community organizations breakdown digital barriers

Shotgun Spratling | 11-3-2010 | Comments | SHARE

Rate this story: --rate--

A demure smile and a thin, black metal clip holding midnight black hair from covering her right eye define Laura Arguello's face. Hers is also a face that could characterize California's slimming digital divide.

The 21-year-old is the poster child for the closure of the state's once magnanimous separation between people with and without access to computers, broadband Internet and the skills needed to use software and hardware in the workplace.

What once was a dramatic discrepancy between the technological haves and have-nots is quickly closing, according to the Public Policy Institute of California's (PPIC) Statewide Surveys. California's Internet usage was relatively stable from 2000 to 2008, but access has dramatically increased the last two years – even during a severe recession.

Only 70 percent of Californians used the Internet while only 55 percent of Californians had access to broadband Internet in 2008. A survey done by PPIC this August showed those numbers have jumped: 81 percent have Internet access and broadband access has climbed 15 percent. Both numbers rank above the national average provided by the 2010 Pew Internet & American Life Project survey.

The battery pack supplying this digital shift is people and organizations highly invested in the community, like Arguello and Community Development Technologies (CDTech) in South Los Angeles.

Arguello first came to CDTech, an organization "dedicated to promoting economic opportunities" for low-income Los Angeles residents, with the goal of furthering her computer skills. She took the non-profit institute's intermediate computers class hoping to learn more about web design.

Under the guidance of Patricia Celidon, CDTech's director of technology and training, Arguello is now learning advanced web site design.

"She is basically teaching me everything I need step-by-step," Arguello said. "[The CDTech teachers] explain things really careful and simple so we can learn sooner."

Arguello's goal is to have her own web site design company in the next five years. She wants to help small businesses in the area grow digitally as well. Indeed, Arguello is already volunteering her time at CDTech as a teacher assistant.

"Their programs are free and they are really helping others. And it's really improving the community," Arguello said.

One way CDTech is helping is through partnerships. It is currently a partner with nine like-minded programs helping to serve underprivileged neighborhoods, such as those in South Los Angeles communities. Those partnerships have been with both local and global organizations.

CDTech partnered with One Economy -- a global non-profit organization that strives to connect underserved areas and turn them into "21st century communities" with free broadband internet access.

One Economy worked with local housing developments to provide that access, including more than 100 homes in the Vernon-Central area of South Los Angeles. In the greater Los Angeles area, One Economy asserts it has connected 5,609 households in 157 projects with 40 affordable housing developers.

But for CDTech, the goal is not only helping connect residents to internet access. They also provide strategic training to enable residents to be able to use new technologies to succeed.

Celidon said CDTech started with bilingual adult classes and intensive youth workshops for 17 to 25-year-olds. The workshops, attended by about 150 youth, lasted four weeks of 80 total hours of training. The training focused on hardware (computer refurbishing), software (Microsoft Office), digital multimedia and leadership development. The workshop was so successful CDTech was recently able to hire three of the trainees.

Parents are happy, according to Celidon, because CDTech provides parental online training to help parents monitor their children's social network accounts and web browsing.

Intent on aiding the estimated 110,000 people of the South Los Angeles zip code of 90011, CDTech went into the school system, partnering with Carver Middle School in the Vernon-Central area. The partnership is now nearly three years old.

Originally the Carver students came to the CDTech due to a lack of computers available at the school, Celidon said. But through youth workshop training, CDTech was able to refurbish 110 computers at the Los Angeles Unified School District warehouse and provide them to Carver.

"We have a large investment in the schools," Celidon said. "We found out [that] the middle school-aged kids – a lot of them fall through the cracks."

CDTech has been able to attack the digital divide at an early age saturating the school with computer learning and interactive teaching. CDTech workers have been paired with teachers to infuse visually stimulating learning tools, such as an Adobe Flash demonstration of the shifting earth of plate tectonics, into the curriculum.

"It was really fun to put science, learning and the technology together. The kids were so happy," Celidon said.

At Crenshaw High School, Daphne Bradford, an Apple Distinguished Educator, saw the same enthusiasm for technology.

"A lot of students are bored in other classes and get excited in my class."

In Bradford's class, students learn about digital mediums and discover the opportunity to produce their own slideshows, videos and other digital content.

Bradford said the students have responded well to opportunities to select their own topics, which keeps them actively engaged with the stories they are composing. The 25 hand-selected students, from all grades and GPA-levels, learn more than just computer programs, though. One of Bradford's goals is to have the students connect to the educational value, both "in real life and the classroom," of learning about technology.

"It's definitely empowering [the students] in the classroom," she said. "We are seeing that immediately. When I first got [to Crenshaw], the kids didn't know how to search the Internet to help with their homework. Now, [the class] is inspiring a lot of creative content, especially in English classes."

The students also see digital media applications used in the workplace. The class, which is only offered in the spring, sends students to career days at NBC and ABC. The students also work with the Ogilvy & Mather advertising agency.

"Some of the students see [digital media in the workplace] and want to go into those fields," Bradford said. "[The class] is introducing the kids into a whole new career pathway. It's more than just fun and games;

steven sample medical marijuana health care reform undocumented students governor 2008 hate crime report juvenile justice anthology middle school theatricum botanicum eric perrodin crenshaw blvd racism community rebuilding free lunch california highway patrol michelle larue laurel galanter art walk marilyne medwar jonathan spaulding guitar diane watson erdavria rose simpson

digital media makes the world go around."

Because Bradford is an Apple certified digital media instructor, students in the class have the opportunity to receive Apple certification, which can help them get a job when they leave high school.

While individuals like Arguello, Bradford and Celidon are working locally, the state is also making strides to decrease the technological access gap. A large step was taken in 2005 when California's Emerging Technology Fund (CETF) was created by the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC).

The CPUC required AT&T and Verizon to contribute $60 million over a five-year period as a condition of the SBC-AT&T and Verizon-MCI mergers. The goal was to create a guiding light for the nation by bridging the digital divide.

"To close the digital divide in the nation," said CETF Senior Vice President Susan Walters, "we have to close it here in California."

Luis Arteaga, CETF's Director of Emerging Markets, said the non-profit corporation had to be careful with how to best use the funds. It used a number of focus groups to determine the most effective strategies to reach California's disconnected population.

The fund has provided a number of grants to local programs such as CDTech, which was financed by CETF for two years. CETF has also done a number of community connect fairs where they showcase new technology and show residents how to get connected. At last year's Taste of Soul festival in Crenshaw, CETF had a computer giveaway as part of one of their community connection showcases.

Los Angeles County was one of the fund's primary targets.

"It was really our test pilot program," Arteaga said. "It's the largest county but at the bottom of the state in broadband connectivity with only 48 percent."

Arteaga said CETF attacked Los Angeles County's issues on several fronts. They used public service announcements on television and radio, created the very basic and easy to use GetConnected! website and informed people to call 2-1-1, a help line for technological questions.

The result? Los Angeles County is now at 67 percent broadband connectivity.

A number of California Congress members, including South Los Angeles' Linda Sanchez, have spoken independently about the important work being done by CETF.

"One of the hurdles people must clear is learning how to use computers and other communication technologies," Sanchez, the daughter of immigrants, said. "Too many working families find themselves on the wrong side of the digital divide."

But CETF "focuses on millions of Californians that need a boost getting into the electronic age." They are "getting disconnected families connected," Sanchez said.

While the numbers have improved remarkably in the last two years, there are still areas of concern. The percentage of Latinos using the Internet (65 percent) and the percentage with broadband access (50 percent) are much lower than other ethnic groups.

The August PPIC survey also shows that United States natives are "far more likely than noncitizens to use the Internet (89 percent versus 51percent) and to have access to broadband (79 percent versus 36 percent)."

Arteaga said there is still growth potential to attract and educate more residents. CETF is working on providing a bilingual guide with La Opinion that will be distributed in various newspapers in November.

"There are people that are extremely low-income, where broadband is the last of their thoughts, and there are groups that are hesitant to embrace technology. But we're trying to offer something for everybody."

That includes all the current and future Laura Arguellos.

Photos courtesy of Creative Commons and CDTech. To view multimedia slide shows produced by residents of the Vernon/Central neighborhood during a CDTech/Intersections workshop, visit: The Stories of Vernon/Central.

Tags: california's emerging technology fund cdtech digital divide mother of many mother of many south los angeles south los angeles

Comments

Great story. Thanks for including Crenshaw High School.
Posted by Daphne Bradford on 11/4/10 at 07:47 PM

Nice report. Thanks for taking the time to write it. There's an error: "magnanimous" means "generous" and describes someone who is very giving and kind.
Posted by John on 11/11/10 at 09:56 PM

Name:

Email:

Location:

URL:
http://

Leave a comment:

☐ Remember my personal information

☐ Notify me of follow-up comments?

Submit   Preview