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Digital connections for low-income Latinos

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Damaris Antonio and her kids, Adrian, 5, and Ariatna, 7, play a game for the first time on a new laptop computer set up by Mario Garcia of the Chicana/Latina Foundation at their home in Sunnyvale, Calif., on Friday, Oct. 3, 2014. The Chicana/Latina Foundation started a program to get kids in low-income families access to the internet at home as a means to close the digital divide. (Gary Reyes/Bay Area News Group) (Gary Reyes)

SUNNYVALE -- Mario Garcia came to Damaris Antonio's tiny apartment bearing gifts most families in Silicon Valley have come to take for granted: a personal computer, Internet service and a secret password to a better life.

"This is going to open up the world for you," said Garcia, a tall and burly technician with the Chicana/Latina Foundation in Burlingame. Antonio, a Mexican immigrant and mother of two young children, didn't quite understand him. She responded with a puzzled smile. "I really don't know anything about computers, but they tell me it's important to have one," she said. "There was just no way we could afford it."

That importance began to sink in when her two kids, 7-year-old Ariatna and 4-year-old Adrian Jr., came home from school. When they saw their mother sitting at the kitchen table with the laptop Garcia had delivered, they jumped on her lap and squealed in delight. Then they fiddled with an online educational dinosaur game.

The refurbished laptop was free and the Internet service will cost the Antonios only \$9.95 a

month. At that moment one more Bay Area low-income family had crossed the digital divide. There are thousands more to go, even in the cradle of high tech.

A large majority of Californians -- 69 percent -- have a broadband Internet connection at home, according to the Public Policy Institute of California, an independent research group. But there are sharp demographic differences among the connected. Latinos, the state's largest ethnic group, are the least connected -- 52 percent. By comparison, blacks are at 71 percent, Asians at 75 percent and whites at 81 percent.

And although most public schools in the Bay Area are wired, thousands of low-income students still have no computer at home.

"That's a huge disadvantage," said Masha Chernyak of the Latino Community Foundation in San Francisco. "That puts them at risk of falling behind at school."

Struggling families

Four years ago, the Chicana/Latina Foundation, as well as the Latino Community Foundation, won grants from the California Emerging Technology Fund and the federal government to connect 3,000 low-income Latino families in the Bay Area to the Internet and supply them with refurbished laptops. The Technology Fund also supported similar projects throughout the Bay Area and Central Coast, including in Oakland and Monterey.

The results were so good the fund gave the two foundations another grant to connect 1,200 more Latino families by March 2015, only these would be poorer and harder to connect and stay connected. For example, the Antonios recently shut down their telephone because they needed all of their money for rent, food and clothing. Garcia had to call a neighbor to arrange his visit.

"We just fell behind and couldn't pay it," said Damaris Antonio, 24. Her husband, Adrian Sr., 26, is a construction day worker. The immigrant couple have lived in the United States for six years and moved to Sunnyvale two years ago from Salinas, where Adrian picked crops.

The two foundations gave their project a straightforward name: "Get Latinos Connected." The grant money actually doesn't pay for the computers or Internet service. It allows them to employ enough staff to get the job done: recruiters to sign up low-income Latino families, technicians to train them, and sweet-talking fundraisers to find the money to buy the computers.

"This stuff isn't cheap," said Alicia Orozco of the Chicana/Latina Foundation.

The foundations pay about \$138 for laptops with basic software, but the families typically pay only \$50. The poorest, like the Antonios, get them free. The foundations cover the difference with cash donations. Silicon Valley heavyweights sometimes pony up with hardware. Chernyak said Google recently donated 455 Nexus tablets to the project.

Another crucial partner is Comcast. The giant Internet provider agreed to offer the discounted connection as a condition for government permission to buy NBC Universal in 2011. Comcast also waives installation costs and extra fees.

Keeping up in school

The Antonio family was signed up at Ellis Elementary School by Lydia Lacy, a bilingual administrative assistant and liaison to the Latino foundations. The school offers computer time at least once a week, she said, but 30 percent of the children don't have computers at home.

It was crucial for Ariatna Antonio to get hers when she did. The tech-savvy school steps up homework assignments in second grade and teachers are posting more of those assignments online. Lacy said kids without home computers aren't punished for failing to turn in homework, but they're challenged more than most to keep up academically. Ariatna's mother said her daughter is good at math but has trouble remembering lectures on other subjects. Garcia told her it's a weakness the girl can overcome by reading those lectures and background material at home on the laptop as many times as she needs.

Get Latinos Connected isn't just for kids. The foundations require the parents to attend computer skills workshops, where they can learn how to write resumes and apply for jobs and health insurance online. They even learn how to deal with customer service at Comcast when something goes wrong.

Damaris Antonio perked up when Garcia called up YouTube sites that teach English to Spanish-speaking adults, and when he told her how she could talk and see her mother in Mexico using Skype, the Internet phone service.

As Garcia packed up his equipment to leave and connect another low-income Latino family, little Ariatna announced her first task on their new laptop:

"I'm going to teach my brother how to type!"

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Get Latinos connected

The Chicana/Latina and Latino Community foundations welcome donations to help low-income Hispanic families in the Bay Area purchase home computers. For more information, go to www.chicanalatina.org or www.latinocf.org.