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Digital Connectors Teaches Community Youth About Technology

Priscilla (Perci) Lucas

Teachers, it is time to teach a new way. Maybe then students will listen to what you have to say. The world is in their hands, so when you teach the children, teach them the very best you can.

"If the community is stressed then the children are stressed," said Timothy Armour, coordinator of the Youth program at Digital Connectors. His common goal along with many North Lawndale residents is to give our youth the necessary tools that will keep them off the corners, out of trouble and above all to help them to become better citizens.

Digital Connectors is an offspring of the "Neighborhood Technology Resource Center (NTRC) that is using technology as a catalyst for academic enrichment among youth that live in underserved communities, career building and advancement for at-risk, out of school youth and adults in both information technology and telecommunications careers, and provided a resource-rich space for local organizations, faith-based institutions and resident groups to expose their constituencies to new technologies and the Internet."

Armour, a young man of 38 who has been with the program for the past two years is comfortable as well as masterful in molding young minds and steering them in the right direction.

While working with the Chicago Public School system for several years instructing after school programs Armour is no stranger to the pitfalls of living in distressed neighborhoods and what it is like to be caught up in the middle as a young adult.

"As a teenager you have no basic rights, but you get more responsibilities and you're



Colin Lovett, One Economy Web Producer for 247 Town Hall, instructs North Lawndale Digital Connectors

trying to find that common ground between becoming older, yet still being young," Armour said. "But knowing more than what a grammar school students does, and then trying to figure out with all of the information that's coming towards them, which parts of the information is positive, which is negative and which is something that you need to know."

Digital Connectors is bridging the gap wiping out boredom that many teens experience with innovative and enlightening

tools, which are attracting young people. Robert Hayes, 17 and Elondia Powell, 16 both stumbled upon this program seeking more than what they have seen on the streets where they live.

The first thing that students hear when you say "After School Program," is translated to more hours in a classroom and what Digital Connectors has done is to show them that after school can be fun.

Robert Hayes is the first to admit that his thought about this program was "no way," but

today his way of thinking has changed dramatically and he is proud that he reconsidered.

"From my experience I would tell other young students not to judge these programs, but to get involved with them. It is hard work, but you can have fun in these programs," said Hayes.

Hayes who plans on pursuing a career in criminal justice is a student at Manley Career Academy is thankful for the opportunity to give back to his community. Like others he wasn't aware of the inner workings of a computer, but has excelled more than he ever expected.

"When I first saw a computer I thought of it as a toy, but when I got into this program and started to build computers I went whoa this ain't no toy...before I learn about computers I had to have a tutor, but now I teach older people and now that it's tax time and people ask for our help since now taxes are done online," Hayes said.

His fellow classmates who come from various schools from the West Side are equally enthusiastic and all of the twenty computers at DC are constantly filled. Armour's vision is to have more, more, and more programs in North Lawndale that are needed and very necessary. He expects nothing less than the best and with the group of students currently in this program, it is a priority.

"My frame of mind was to come and say (to the students) is listen, this is what I am expecting of you a lot of work; a lot of high

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quality work there will be times to play, but when its time to work we cut that out and we work," Armour said. "I think because I had some great mentors too and that's the lesson that I learned that when it was time to play, play as hard as you want to in a respectful manner within the guidelines of where you are, but when it is time to work you got to work extremely hard just as hard if not more than how you played."

It is with this dedication and expectation of excellence that these students are thriving and going beyond the normal school hours to better prepare themselves for life after high school. Elondia Powell is on her way to Spellman College and she exudes confidence and is excited about her future and what Digital Connectors has taught and has encouraged her in ways that many young women need.

"This program has helped me to better my social skill, my education and gave me something to do other than being at home and bored," Powell said. She encourages other young women to find ways of helping the community by gaining knowledge, or getting involved with programs like DC.

"Go out into the community find places like this and find out how you can volunteer and just help," she said. "You have to put some effort in it." Digital Connectors is gaining notoriety within the North Lawndale area and the youth are seeking more centers like DC to get away from the streets and sometimes a stressful family life.

"Youth development is growing up and going through things," said Armour. "You're going to have bad days, kids are going to get expelled from schools you might have to deal with gang issues, or are they in a gang and want to get out, or on the verge of getting in, are they not gang bangers, but maybe drug

peddling there are a lot of issues and a lot of other resources that are out there in our communities that are not all positive," he said.

Armour simply wants to see the adults in the community, and those who are working with the young people in programs such as DC to take a stand and confront the negative things that they see our young ones doing.

"I think the community needs to know that there are programs that teenagers are in and they are trying to be better," he said. "Just because their pants are sagging and they might have on a white t-shirt does not always mean that you're looking at a thug or somebody that is not smart or somebody that does not want help. Even most of them who are gang banging and fighting in the roughest high school, they all want help," said Armour.

Working with these young people reminds Armour how much he sees himself in each child whether male or female and his compassion for teaching them and encouraging them rein supreme over all the negative influences that they have to overcome and they are overcoming!

The world won't get any better if we just let it be; the world won't get any better we got to change it yeah, just you and me.

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