



Meet East Oakland's Digital Connectors

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Sa'Vone Addison and Rashad Taylor at the Computer Center

The Lion Creek Crossing development in East Oakland is so new, the streetlights to turn into it from the freeway are covered with electric tape. Cement mixers crowd the streets as construction workers finish the last couple hundred units of the affordable housing development. But ask any of the initial residents where the computer center is, and they can walk you right to its plant-lined entrance.

Since it quietly opened its doors in December, the lab of shiny new iMacs, musical keyboards, and other gadgets has become a popular hangout for the first young residents of Lion Creek. Teenagers peruse MySpace and younger ones play online games. Preteens like Sa'Vone Addison and Rashad Taylor eagerly show off a [blog](#) they created at the lab, and describe how they helped connect new apartment units to a wireless network.

The thirst for computer access is just as strong in East Oakland as it is in Temescal or Rockridge, where a table at a wi-fi accessed café is hot real estate. The difference, explains community technology organizer Tony Fleming, is that here, a stone's throw from the Oakland Coliseum, "there are no cafes and social opportunities." Not only do many households lack computers, but kids lack constructive after school activities and safe places to hang out. "There are no nightclubs, no places to go and be social, you know, and the Internet can maybe bridge that particular lack," he says

That is one of the goals of Mr. Fleming and his partners when they officially open the Lion Creek Crossing Neighborhood Networks Center this Wednesday (February 20). By integrating computer access with the neighborhood before the housing development is complete, they hope to be one step ahead of addressing the community's need, rather than several steps behind, where many community technology centers find themselves.

For Mr. Fleming, the opening of the center comes during what he sees as a resurgence of interest in digital inclusion. Just last week, Laney College hosted a successful day-long event, the Digital Inclusion Summit, where attendees focused on the digital divide in Oakland.

Having worked in community technology for almost two decades, he has experienced the ebbs and flows of public concern for closing the technology gap between Silicon Valley and East Oakland. During the height of the dot-com boom, it seemed everyone wanted to build a part of the bridge to cross the "digital divide." But when the boom went bust, there was, as Mr. Fleming calls it, "a retreat from the divide."

That retreat led to centers like this being left without the funding to continue, and today, in Oakland -- as across the nation -- vast gaps remain between technology users and others. According to a recent [study of Internet use](#) in California, divides between technology and non-technology users are growing along racial lines.

"It's an opportunity divide more than anything," Mr. Fleming says. "(It's) the opportunity to participate in society or not." He points to the resources of online job searching, social networking for youth, rehab services for parolees, skill attainment in music and photo editing. It's the opportunity to "see beyond this community or beyond the opportunities that are limited in this community. And if they have to create their way out of it," Mr. Fleming suggests with a laugh, "well that's fine too."

Creating new paths to opportunity is something Mr. Fleming himself can relate to. The San Francisco native began tackling the digital divide after a career as a radio talk show host. He sees the transition as a natural one. On his community-oriented show, "tech became a relevant issue" for his listeners in the mid-eighties. Frustrated by the growing commercialism of radio and the limitations of simply talking about issues, Mr. Fleming made a transition from talking about issues to working on them.



Tony Fleming

The Oakland non-profit [OCCUR](#), which Mr. Fleming had long been active with, decided to commit itself to digital inclusion, and in 1997, they opened East Oakland's first community technology center, the [Eastmont Computing Center](#), with Mr. Fleming at its helm. In its eleven years, it has trained thousands of local residents in beginning and intermediate computer skills.

Now it's time to begin imagining the possibilities of the new computer lab. Its first users have already begun doing so. Thirteen-year old Savone Addison has his eyes set on a future in pro-football. "But if that doesn't happen," he says, "I'm gonna go into technology."