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Comcast Digital Connectors program celebrates successes in the community

By Dave Hodges
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As a Digital Connector, Tikieria Cherry, 17, has had an educational experience unlike any other.

"We actually had the experience of taking apart a computer and seeing how it works," she said of one session in the program that helps teens learn about the digital age they are a part of. "With every career today you have to be a little computer literate, so it helps."

A national program of the educational nonprofit One Economy Corp., Digital Connectors seeks to reach individuals and communities — often disadvantaged or underserved technologically — that don't participate in the digital economy. With major financial support from Comcast, the program has spread to 16 sites across the country and expects to add another 30 or more by year's end.

Monday was the official launch in Tallahassee, though 16 students at the Apalachee Ridge Technology Learning Center have been in the program since September.

"I am convinced that we will change the lives of these kids," said David L. Cohen, Comcast executive vice president.

The 3,000 participants in the U.S., who range in age from 14 to 21, are eligible to earn a certificate of completion from Cisco Systems, another corporate partner.

But Cohen said Digital Connectors' real value is in its ability to leverage the efforts of the teens. Each commits to contribute community service hours to tell others — family, neighbors, peers — about the technology they have seen and its benefits.

Thus far, the Digital Connectors have volunteered 56,000 total hours of community service, he said.

Terrance McNeil, director of the learning center and one of its instructors, called the program "a phenomenal experience."

"This is probably one of the best models of how I've seen community and corporate and city come together, work together and pull together for a common goal, which we know is very important," he said.

Comcast and One Economy estimate that 63 percent of Americans who have broadband service available to them actually subscribe to it, on average. That statistic is somewhat higher in Tallahassee. Cohen said that means one-third don't utilize the service. "The No. 1 issue that is a barrier to adoption is digital literacy," he added.

Charles Prater, 17, has worked with program since it started. He will be a junior at Rickards High School this fall.

"I knew for a fact that I would learn something, and boy, have I," he told the gathering at the TCC Capitol Center downtown.

"This has been a beautiful experience for me. It has helped me express myself in a way I thought I would never, ever be able to get to," Prater said.
