

## Street Tech, a San Pablo program offering computer and life skills, helps low-income people who are . . .

### Taking a Chance on Success

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Nine months ago, 32 young people from poor families in western Contra Costa County were chosen for a new class, called Street Tech, to train them for high-tech careers. Half the students dropped out, while the rest prepare to graduate this week. This is the story behind the diplomas. .

During his commute from Richmond to Marin, Nai Fou Saechao had a lot of time to think about how much of his \$12-an-hour wages were disappearing to gas and car payments.

He thought about it even more when he learned he and his wife were going to have their first baby.

So he took a risk. He quit his warehouse job and enrolled in a new program called Street Tech, which promised entree into the dot-com economy and an escape from low-skilled service jobs.

While computer training centers in low-income neighborhoods are sprouting up everywhere, Street Tech was different. It would do more than drive into town, drop off a computer and expect people to point and click their way out of poverty.

Street Tech would incubate one class of students in a computer boot camp -- four hours, four nights a week, plus a four-hour class on Saturdays, for nearly a year.

"I had to take a chance," Saechao said, "because there was no future for me at the distribution plant, but I was worried because I quit my job without another one lined up."

He put a pager in his pocket in case his wife went into labor, and made his way to the city of San Pablo's Community Resource Center, located between a job center for welfare recipients and a Vietnamese take-out that makes its own tofu and soy milk.

There, seated around a U-shaped table, he saw 31 other people just like him:

18 to 25 years old, uncomfortable in their "casual work" khakis and button-down shirts, all looking for a second chance on life.

If everything went right, students would learn how to program and manipulate the guts of a computer well enough to pass the "MCP" test to become a Microsoft Certified Professional.

It would be their ticket to compete for entry-level tech jobs paying \$40,000 a year or more.

"We wanted them to have careers at the end of this, not just a computer and a connection to the Internet," said Paul Lamb, who founded Street Tech with buddy Doug Stein.

The men made their careers in the computer industry and also worked with Southeast Asian teen gangs in the Richmond area. They wanted to bring technology to the streets in a way no one else had tried.

The class would be free, and would include daily "life skills" lessons to prepare for the digital workplace.

Lamb and Stein received a big windfall last year, when Vice President Al Gore announced \$10 million in federal grants to create computer centers in 40 low-income neighborhoods nationwide. Lamb won \$75,000 of the money, landed corporate and foundation grants and got the city of San Pablo's blessing to launch Street Tech inside the city's computer center.

At the first class in April, Lamb told students they were going to learn together. It was OK that they didn't know much about networking, that they probably went to schools that had little, if any, connection to the Internet. They would help each other.

His audience was black, Asian, Latino and white. Forty percent were unemployed, 30 percent were on welfare. Most of those who worked held minimum wage jobs.

Most didn't have a computer in their home.

"We chose who we thought would commit to it, not who we thought would be stars and transition easily into jobs," Lamb said.

To get started, students put together binders with plans to stay motivated and drop bad habits like smoking and watching too much TV.

In puffy bubble lettering, Blontae Laurant's wellness plan for Monday, April 10 listed: 3 glasses water; 2-3 meals; 3 cigarette limit; go to school; rest; look for job.

The students signed a pledge to attend daily, stay clean, wear "office casual clothes," and give back to the community once they found work.

By the second week, the first student disappeared, a Haitian immigrant with a learning disability who was raised on welfare.

"He wouldn't wear office casual clothes, he wouldn't do his assignments," Lamb said. "We gave extra help, but it boiled down to an attitude thing. He felt he was owed help -- without understanding he had to put in work to get help."

The dress code was the hardest rule to follow.

As the weeks went by, students began evaluating each other's wardrobes. What some of them considered nice, such as leggings and sleeveless shirts, others said was too casual for work.

Computer trainer Adrienne Davis came up with a solution -- Thursday became dress-down day.

At mid-point of the class in July, Lamb and the students decided to cut back on the daily life skills classes to devote more time to computer training.

Students were not passing the weekly programming tests, and were getting irritated with the daily lessons on how to fit in at the office.

As they progressed, students learned how to program network passwords and install motherboards. There were celebrations -- Nai Fou Saechao was the first to get an internship, teaching children computer games at the Richmond YMCA. Another student earned her high school diploma.

More students dropped out. One woman, who came to class with noticeable bruises, gave up after her boyfriend was released from jail. Lamb brought in domestic violence counselors to help her, but it wasn't enough.

One student's cousin was killed in a drive-by shooting, and the student couldn't go on. Another student's cousin committed a double homicide.

Laurant wound up caring for children of a friend who was arrested for shoplifting.

"They even gave me a computer so I could keep up with the class at home, but it was too hard to be away," said Laurant, who now works as an aide to a Pinole student with cerebral palsy.

Lamb found himself in doctors' offices with students who were in car accidents, became pregnant or who just needed a shoulder to cry on.

"Success depends much more on getting through the life stuff," Lamb said in July, when 21 students remained. "Computer skills are only about half of what Street Tech is turning out to be."

Lamb, who had his own baby on the way in addition to a computer consulting job, lost sleep worrying about his students. He hired a career counselor to help them with the most difficult situations.

The remaining students paired up in study groups to help each other make it to graduation.

In October, four students got jobs at Excite@home, and another computer company, Proxicom, offered the class Web design workshops. Lamb, meanwhile, gathered nearly \$120,000 in corporate and foundation grants to keep the program going.

When Street Tech met for the last time last month, there were 18 students sitting around the U-shaped table. Five have already passed the test to become Microsoft professionals. Fourteen have high-tech jobs, troubleshooting computer systems for Excite@home, the East Bay Municipal Utility District and Providian Financial.

"I'm happy I did this; it's been a catapult shot for me in the right direction," said Cletus Keeby III, who manages computerized phone networks for Providian Financial in Pleasanton.

Keeby said he barely made it through high school after hanging out with the "wrong crowd."

"I have dreams -- I want to make movies," he said. "And now I can work in a career that will pay the bills and allow me to save money for filmmaking."

Two students are testing game software for the Learning Company in Novato. Their new boss is Vansouk Lianemany, one of the street toughs Lamb met in Richmond many years ago.

"I was a trouble kid, and when no one would visit me in Juvenile Hall, Paul would," said Lianemany. "He helped me get my first job and he told me at the time that one day I would give back."

Nai Fou Saechao landed a networking job at Providian, nearly doubling his warehouse salary. His son was born in May. Each morning Saechao kisses Ty before slipping out the door to walk to the BART station.

He chose a word from his family's native Mien language for his son's name. Ty means respect and honor.

"I never thought I would be in this industry, because the word goes around that you have to know people to get in. I didn't know where to start, really," Saechao said. "This has elevated me and given me hope."

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## **TECH GRADS**

The Street Tech graduation will be Thursday from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. at San Pablo City Hall, 13831 San Pablo Ave. For more information about Street Tech, or to apply for the second class starting Jan. 8, go to [www.street-tech.org](http://www.street-tech.org), or call Coretta Alexander, (510) 517-0934.