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Local news

Getting with the program

Posted: Saturday, Mar 5th, 2011
BY: TODD GUILD

Watsonville High School sophomore Stephanie Barraza spends Wednesday afternoons teaching fifth-graders computer basics and video game design.

She said the work, part of Pajaro Valley Unified School District's Watsonville TEC program, gives her a chance to impart her knowledge, and helps prepare the fifth-graders for a world in which computer knowledge has become all but obligatory.

"It's part of the future," she said. "We're creating the future in a way."

For her work with the program, Barraza, 15, has won the prestigious Bay Area Award for Aspirations in Computing from the National Center for Women & Information Technology.

Barraza said she beat out 60 other young people throughout the Bay Area to win the award.

She was also runner-up in the national equivalent of the award, for which thousands of students were competing.

"I feel really proud that I stood out from all those other people," she said.

As part of the award, Barraza earned a \$16,000 scholarship and a digital flip camera.

She said her love for technology has spurred a desire to eventually have a career as a software engineer.

Teaching younger people, she said, brings her full circle from her time as a fifth-grader, when she received the same instruction from high school students through



Watsonville High School sophomore Stephanie Barraza (standing) helps E.A. Hall Middle School students Luz Chavez (left) and Alexis Rojas in the Watsonville TEC program Friday. (Photos by Tarmo Hannula)



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the program.

“We’re role models to them,” she said. “We’re teaching them new things and we’re changing the outlook that kids in Watsonville have about technology.”

The teaching program, called “TEC Teach,” is part of Watsonville TEC (short for Tecnología-Educación-Comunidad), which was created to bring South County students up to speed with information technology, where organizers say Latinas are vastly underrepresented.

“We want to create an environment where the girls are proud of what they are doing,” Watsonville TEC project director Jacob Martinez said. “They have the skills to do it, they just haven’t been given the opportunity.”

Watsonville TEC is a popular after-school program that encourages students, particularly Latinas, to prepare for careers in technology and computer science. It was funded by a grant from the National Science Foundation, which was secured by Scotts Valley education and research nonprofit ETR Associates, in a partnership with the Pajaro Valley Unified School District.

PVUSD Director of Extended Learning Services Joe Trautwein, who helped forge the program in 2004, said it originally began as the Girl Game Company, in which girls learned computer basics, then how to build games using software.

But Trautwein said the program was intended to be more than just a fun-and-games activity. Organizers wanted to make young people competitive in modern job markets.

“We’re bringing in science and technological skills in quite a sophisticated way,” Trautwein said.

The program has since morphed and now serves both boys and girls.

After-school programs such as Watsonville TEC give students an alternative to a school curriculum that has been gutted by budget cuts and state-mandated testing that focuses on English and math, Trautwein said.

“More importantly, technology is a part of our life,” Trautwein said. “We all use it, but not a lot of us know how it works. We use a computer, but we don’t know how to use it creatively, and that’s what they’re teaching the kids.”

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Barraza, along with the 25 other Bay Area winners, will receive the award at the Computer History Museum in Mountain View on March 19.

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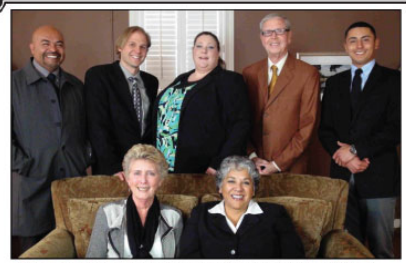
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