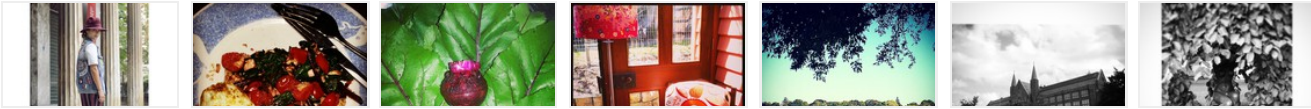


01 OCT 2014



54° Clear



'Savvy' Tech Students Coming From Watsonville Schools

A high schooler's national technology honor is a high point for the Watsonville TEC program.

By Jennifer Squires (Patch Staff) (/users/jennifer-squires)

🕒 Updated January 6, 2012 at 7:59 pm | 💬





Editors Note: This is the third in a series of stories about Watsonville TEC, an award-winning program that encourages Watsonville youth to pursue careers in technology.

Watsonville schools are quietly becoming a stronghold of young computer programmers, thanks to a small, grant-funded program that launched five years ago to help Latina girls learn about technology.

, better known as Watsonville TEC, is an extended learning program that reaches students from elementary school through high school graduation, as well as their parents.

And it's netting phenomenal results.

"Watsonville is getting this buzz as a community producing kids who are savvy in technology," explained Jacob Martinez, the project director for the program, which is run through The Center for Youth Success at ETR Associates in Scotts Valley.

One may not expect that from a city best known for strawberry fields and more often in the news for gang violence than academic achievement, but it's true.

Watsonville High junior Stephanie Barraza won a national award for Aspirations in Computing from the National Center for Women and Information Technology (<http://www.ncwit.org/award/award.winners.html>) in December. Barraza was one of 35 young women selected for the honor from more than 1,110 applicants.

But Barraza is not the first Watsonville TEC student to garner accolades.

A team of girls from placed fourth and eighth in a statewide team competition in 2011 where no other middle school teams rated in the top 20.

Also, three teenage girls from Watsonville TEC have earned the Bay Area Affiliate award from NCWIT in 2010 and 2011, including Barraza. That places them in the top-25 of female high school students in region. Martinez expects to have more winners this year.

“If you look at the winners, they’re all coming from private schools,” Martinez said.

Those private school programs have more funding and greater access to technology, Martinez contends. By comparison, Pajaro Valley Unified School District often students come from families without computers at home. Some parents have little education, may not be comfortable communicating in English and work blue-collar agriculture jobs, like picking strawberries.

Barraza was one of Martinez's students in his first cohort of middle schoolers five years ago, called the Girl Game Company. Then, she was a sixth grader who wasn't sure she wanted to stick with the program. Now with this award, her whole world has changed.

“It allows me to have a lot of scholarships to a lot of schools all over the country,” she said. “I’m leaning toward computer engineering or computer science”

For her accomplishment, Barraza and her family will be flown to Bank of America headquarters in North Carolina for the awards ceremony in March. During the trip—her first to the East Coast—she'll get plaques for both herself and Watsonville High, as well as a scholarship, a laptop computer and other prizes from technology companies.

"These kinds of programs also assist students in their college readiness and even their applications to colleges," said PVUSD Assistant Superintendent Murry Sheckman. "Our colleagues in admissions offices are looking for the kind of technology, service and leadership that the TEC program has afforded our PVUSD students.

If Barraza decides to study computer science, university engineering departments will be knocking on her door, according to Martinez. He's talking MIT, Berkely, UC Santa Cruz and beyond.

"The national winner is pretty huge," Martinez said. "I was just blown away when I found out about it. Basically she's set, any school she wants to go to."

The application process involved a teacher recommendation and statements from the students about what they had done in the area of computer science, as well as their goals. Barraza shared her hope to create software that helps rural communities that are cut off from technology.

Also, "she wrote about her work being a teacher in the Tech Teach program and being a role model in a community that really lacks female role models," said Martinez. Tech Teach is another element of Watsonville TEC, where high school students mentor elementary and middle school kids.

"It's a field that's mostly men so that's important for kids to see," Barraza said, speaking about women working in the tech field.

Barraza's achievement is one of many positives to come from the program.

"It is a real focus for us to try to bring our community into the 21st Century and I think our after school programs are on the cutting edge statewide in helping us do it," Joe Trautwein, director of student services for PVUSD, explained.

Current state Assembly member and state Senate candidate Bill Monning (<http://www.billmonning.org/>) toured a Watsonville TEC class and other after school programs at Cesar Chavez Middle School with District Attorney Bob Lee and Watsonville Police Chief Manny Solano in December.

"If you invest in kids and pay attention to them ... it's going to come back in the form of more engagement, better grades," said Monning, who would represent Watsonville if elected.

More than 900 Pajaro Valley students have participated in Watsonville TEC since its inception five years ago and the program's latest grant will "scale up" the services to students in San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara and Fresno through a partnership with MESA.

Mathematics, Engineering, Science Achievement (<http://mesa.ucop.edu/about/>) is a statewide program that works with economically disadvantaged students interested in math, science and engineering. There are MESA centers in the communities where Watsonville TEC will expand its reach.

"This program is becoming the model program of the country in terms of 'How do you engage young Latinos in technology?'" Martinez said.

Read more:

-
-

Share This Article

0&winname=addthis&pub=ra-53285eac5a065339&source=tbx-300&lng=en-
patch.com%2Fcalifornia%2Fwatsonville%2Fsavvy-tech-students-coming-from-