

World's busiest Web site headquarters hosts, mentors PV youth

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BY: ROGER SIDEMAN

MOUNTAIN VIEW — One hour's drive and a world away, the headquarters of the planet's most visited and most profitable company on the Internet opened its doors Tuesday for some lucky middle school girls.

In the heart of Google's sprawling campus, known as the Googleplex, Lakeview Middle School student Brittany Hackwell surveyed the cafeteria stocked with gourmet cuisines from around the world — one of many free perks workers enjoy.

"All I know is that now I want to work here," Hackwell said, lunch tray in hand.

Any Googler, as employees call themselves, will tell you that lunchtime imprints a lasting impression on visitors.

But more than a free lunch, these 40 girls came to get a taste of the big time.

They jumped at a rare invitation to spend a half-day interacting with elite computer engineers at the company headquarters off Highway 101. The girls belong to a popular after-school program that encourages girls, particularly Latinas, to prepare for careers in technology and computer science.

Called "Girl Game Company," the free, 18-month-long program currently serves five Pajaro Valley middle schools, and will expand to additional schools next year.

"A lot of these girls never get out of Watsonville, so to come to a place like this is a whole different experience," said Jacob Martinez, program coordinator. "I think the most impactful thing the girls are seeing today is just how many women there are here with careers in engineering. A lot of the girls' parents are farmworkers."

A visit to Google HQ is actually a big deal for anyone who uses the Internet, Martinez added, and the field trip's entourage included school district administrators, teachers and parents.

Google invited Girl Game Company to return Tuesday for a second time because company employees "had never seen so much excitement" as they did with the first batch of students, who came last spring, Martinez said.

When she's not designing computer games in the after-school program, E.A. Hall Middle School student Vanessa Gonzales-Tovar is at the family computer every night, taking turns with her two brothers. Gonzales-Tovar said she was amazed by the Googlers she met working behind-the-scenes.

"It's really fun to see how everything is made because it takes a lot of brainwork and partnership," she said.

That's like music to the ears of company officials, who are stepping up to provide mentoring for girls and underrepresented communities where positive role models are sometimes lacking.



Middle-school students from Watsonville visit Google's Mountain View campus, known as the Googleplex, Tuesday to interact with lead computer engineers. Shown at lower right are E.A. Hall students Lizzet Diaz and Guadalupe Castro.

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“We at Google are doing what we can to show what options there are in math and science,” said Diversity Program Manager Emily Nishi.

Diversity in the company’s workforce is also good business, Nishi said, because new ideas and products will succeed if they reflect the company’s increasingly global audience. Diversity is also important to the company because it’s in a fierce, worldwide competition to hire top talent, mainly from China and India.

The girls from the Pajaro Valley, however, are still a couple years away from being ready to hand in their job applications. At some level, the company just wants the girls to know they have a shot at upward mobility.

“One of the hopes we have today is that the girls get a sense of how fun it would be working in a corporate environment,” Nishi said.

That’s an easy message to promote at Google HQ. The modern headquarters is the new poster child for worker satisfaction in corporate America, filled with pets, bouncy exercise balls and nearly every service imaginable within its candy-colored walls.

The company hires about 100 new people every week, said company spokesman Calum Docherty. It’s a staggering number of fresh workers that only seems small next to the number of seekers – the company receives 3,000 job applications per day, Docherty said.

Girl Game Company helps prepare the girls for futures in the corporate world by teaching them how to run a business, from hiring to marketing, all through role-playing. And teacher Jeanine Boretz goes over the basics of computer game design.

In a conference room Tuesday, the girls stood up to a microphone in small teams and presented their software creations in front of Google engineers.

“It really helps build up their confidence,” said Elizabeth Stoll, after-school program coordinator at Lakeview Middle School.

Starting in February, Girl Game Company will be open to all girls at Cesar Chavez Middle School, Stoll said. The program is already offered to girls at Alianza, Lakeview, Pajaro and E.A. Hall middle schools, and Watsonville Charter School for the Arts.

The program is free, thanks to a \$1 million grant from a National Science Foundation program that was created in response to fears that the world’s growing technology workforce is edging out the United States.

The grant was secured by Scotts Valley education and research nonprofit ETR Associates, in a partnership with the Pajaro Valley Unified School District, which provides the space.

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To learn more about Girl Game Co., contact Jacob Martinez at 438-4060 or jacobm@etr.org.

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Photos by Tarmo Hannula

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