

Chicago Sun Times on CITC

Programs open Web access, bridge digital divide

SCI-TECH SCENE | 2 programs succeed in opening Web access, bridging digital divide

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BY SANDRA GUY

South Sider Nathaniel M. Terry knew he liked working with computers, but it wasn't until he took classes in building computer networks that he found his calling.

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Nathaniel Terry credits his training via Charity in the Community with "opening a lot of doors" for him. He says he's worked on the computer networks of three companies and loves "every minute of it."

(John H. White/Sun-Times)

"It's hands-on training throughout the whole program, which I love. I like to get my hands dirty," said Terry, 32, who worked in law offices for 10 years while he sought his long-term career goals.

The program in which Terry enrolled is Charity in the Community (CITC), a non-profit started seven years ago by Henry Razor, a product training services manager at networking equipment maker Tellabs, and Razor's wife, Janette.

The couple started the center (CITCchicago.org) near the border of the Englewood and Auburn-Gresham neighborhoods after they realized how many people needed basic computer training.

As more non-profits started doing basic training, CITC changed its focus to teaching local residents the innards of the Internet. Students now learn during the 140-hour, four-month coursework to understand infrastructure technologies, and get hands-on experience in setting up a Windows network, installing broadband networks, integrating wireless security into the networks and other applications. Students pay \$125 per month, and financial aid is available.

Seventy percent of the students get good-paying jobs after they complete the coursework, Henry Razor said.

The students receive A-Plus certification training with Windows Networking and Active Directory.

Tellabs Foundation saw the demand for the program, and spent \$30,000 to secure a building at 7816 S. Ashland as CITC's headquarters. The Foundation also donates equipment and assistance.

"Our employees inspire us, especially when they create opportunities for young people in math, science and technology," said Meredith Hilt, executive director of the Tellabs Foundation.

The Razors donate \$15,000 personally each year to the program.

Said Terry, "This is opening a lot of doors. I now have experience working (on networks) for three small companies. I'm loving every minute of it."

Two studies released last month reveal the need for such programs due to the continued magnitude of the digital divide: A report from the University of Illinois at Chicago revealed nearly 40 percent of Chicagoans have little or no access to the Internet, primarily in low-income and non-native-English-speaking neighborhoods, while a separate report illustrated a new digital divide between those with high-speed access and those with low-speed access to the Internet.

Said Razor, "Broadband access is a quality-of-life issue. We see people who stand in line or walk long distances to the library just to fill out a job application or do school work. If people -- and I'm talking in large part responsible people -- cannot afford access, it might as well be available in China."