TECH SKILLS
COMPUTE FOR
CLUB YOUTH

TEEN'S TURNAROUND AND LATEST STUDIES DEMONSTRATE THE VALUE OF CLUB TECH

By John Collins

About halfway between San Jose and San Francisco, you'll find the communities of East Palo Alto and Palo Alto, Calif. While they share a name, they are, in fact, separate, distinct entities.

Palo Alto, home to high-tech businesses such as Facebook and Hewlett-Packard, is a prosperous city with a per capita income of nearly $66,000. Among residents 25 and older, 97 percent hold at least a high school degree. On the other side of the Bayshore Freeway, in East Palo Alto, life is much different.

Conditions in East Palo Alto have improved since 1992, when 42 homicides earned it the notorious title of the nation's "per capita murder capital." But life is still hard here, where the annual per capita income is $16,680, 19 percent of residents live below the poverty threshold, and barely 70 percent of residents 25 or older hold a high school diploma.

Richard Kaho, 17, grew up and still resides in East Palo Alto. Today, after a personal journey that included finding his passion through Boys & Girls Clubs of America's Club Tech program, he's working to increase those high school graduation numbers.

CLUB TECH'S IMPACT

Last year, Richard collaborated with Betzy Padilla and Alexis Garcia – fellow members of the Boys & Girls Clubs of the Peninsula in nearby Menlo Park – on a video project for the 2009-10 Club Tech National Digital Arts Festival. The short video, a call to young people to stay in school, was named the national Movie Tech winner in the 16-18 age group.

Since the program's inception in 2000, Club Tech founding sponsor Microsoft has donated more than $100 million in software to Boys & Girls Clubs throughout the United States and on U.S. military installations worldwide. As a result, thousands of young people have learned advanced digital arts skills in graphic design, animation, web design, video production, music production and robotics. Additionally, millions of Club members are able to learn to use Word, Excel and PowerPoint, ubiquitous software used daily in schools, businesses and by the general public.

By providing young people of all ages and circumstances access to technology resources, Club Tech enables them to develop crucial skills that are central to academic success, workplace preparation and being fully engaged in modern society. The program's approach helps kids to expand their imaginations – and their aspirations.

A BOY'S LIFE

Just 2.2 square miles in area, East Palo Alto seems more a small town than a city. But that doesn't mean it doesn't have big city problems.

PROMOTING DIGITAL LITERACY

To further enhance technology education for Boys & Girls Club youth, Club Tech founding sponsor Microsoft has teamed up with Comcast, a longtime supporter of local Clubs, to promote the critical importance of digital literacy. The exciting initiative includes a dynamic new series of public service announcements and an innovative public advocacy campaign. Digital literacy represents an important component of academic success, one of Boys & Girls Clubs of America's three key impact areas to help put youth on the path to great futures. BGCA is grateful to Microsoft and Comcast for their vital support. Stay tuned for more details soon.

In April 2010, the East Palo Alto Police Department verified at least 10 active gangs, comprising more than 300 members, in the community. By employing several innovative initiatives, the police have had success curbing gang activity. However, the department still directly links more than 80 percent of violent acts in its jurisdiction to gangs.

With such prevalence, it's hardly surprising that Richard became a gang member. What is startling is that he was just 9 years old when he joined.

"I started off with gangs, just being a real bad person," says Richard. By the time he reached high school, his aberrant disposition was becoming unwelcome. In due course, his bad attitude, poor behavior and penchant for violence led the school to expel him. But worse news lay ahead.

Shortly after his expulsion, Richard learned his mother was seriously ill. The two events gave the young man pause, prompting a critical self-assessment. His delinquent ways had already gotten him kicked out of school. Now, he feared, continuing to lead the same irresponsible lifestyle could cause his mother's health to further deteriorate. Richard knew he had to change his ways.

He began attending a community school near the Boys & Girls Clubs of the Peninsula. Soon, he became involved with Club Tech, where he discovered and embraced his passion for music and video. The Club's music studio became an outlet for Richard's deepest thoughts, feelings and concerns, as he evaluated his life through his lyrics. Club mentors encouraged him academically and helped build confidence in his talents, encouraging him to produce songs and music videos.

EMPIRICAL EXPLANATIONS

Richard's story bears out several recent independent studies of Club Tech. For example, a 2009 report by the Technology & Social Change Group at the University of Washington Information School (formerly the Center for Information & Society) found that Club technology programs attract youth who would not otherwise be there, particularly teens. Club technology programs were also found to be uniquely relevant, engaging and effective because of the experienced youth development professionals who implement them. Moreover, Clubs were found to be creating environments where youth are enhancing their technical fluency to help them adapt to a changing workforce.

In another 2009 study by research consultants Rockman et al, and Youth Development Strategies, Boys & Girls Club youth enrolled in Club Tech were compared to members of Boys & Girls Clubs that did not run the program. At the start of the evaluation, the two groups' technology skill level was the same. But upon its completion, the Club Tech participants reported a much larger increase in how often they used advanced software skills to execute tasks such as editing photos, designing websites and publications, and producing videos.

Finally, a 2007 MGS Consulting study found that youth who participate in Club Tech and programs like it have a much greater chance of engaging in healthy behaviors and a greatly decreased risk for engaging in risky or destructive behaviors.

> Youth who participate in Club Tech have a greater chance of engaging in healthy behaviors and avoiding risky behaviors.

TECHNOLOGY STEERS FUTURE SUCCESS

Young people who actively engage in Club Tech have an advantage. They feel more competent when it comes to technology and see computers as more than a means to an end for the "fun stuff" like social networking and games. They recognize that these critical skills can help shape their futures.

Today, Richard regularly attends the Club, where besides being a Club Tech participant, he works as a Junior Staff member. He was also re-admitted to the public school system. For Richard, his turnaround is easy to track. "Ever since I started going to the Boys & Girls Club," he says, "I started switching my life around."

Visit dafgallery.bgca.net to see the winning video by Richard, Betzy and Alexis and all the national Digital Arts Festival winners' artwork.

John Collins is senior writer/editor for BGCA.

BE GREAT! GRADUATE!

Once expelled from school, Richard Kaho, along with fellow Club teens Betzy Padilla and Alexis Garcia, now exhort youth to stay in school in their award-winning video.

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