

The Oakland Tribune

SERVING OAKLAND FOR 125 YEARS



Thursday, October 22, 2009

By Sean Maher

Eastmont tech center opening today

Facility's managers hope to bridge digital divide, help turn around city's troubled district

OAKLAND – A technology center deliberately placed in one of the city's most notoriously violent and troubled neighborhoods will host its grand opening today, celebrating a years-long campaign to turn around the area's troubled past.

The Eastmont Technology Center is home to five teachers, about 100 computer workstations and more than 400 monthly students all working to combat the digital divide that executive director David Glover said plays a big part in grinding people down during these rough times.

The center provides free technology access and classes to a range of students from youth to seniors and beginning at the level at which many students have no idea how to even use a keyboard.

There's no reason not to come in here," Glover said. "In this world sometimes there's a dignity threshold. People don't want to appear unknowledgeable. It can be amazing to see how when folks have gotten past that first mystery of the keyboard, how that appetite sets in."

Nuna McKee, an Oakland resident taking her second series of computer classes for seniors, said she has learned how to make birthday cards, calendars, business cards and letterhead, and how to use Google to search the Internet.

"I had a computer at home, but I didn't know how to do much with it," McKee said. "I could type in Word a little, but I was worried if I did too much I was going to do something to hurt the machine. Now I feel like I'm pretty good."

The Oakland Tribune

SERVING OAKLAND FOR 125 YEARS

Teacher Betty Glenn said her favorite part of working at the center is seeing the gleam in students' eyes once they "get it."

"I believe and feel if you don't use the skills you learn, you forget them," Glenn said. "So my policy is to take something from the classroom and implement it in my students' daily lives. For example, many grandparents are raising their grandchildren and need to help them in school. It helps the quality of life for everyone, and it makes the classes useful."

Learning to navigate Internet can be empowering when life in East Oakland is discouraging, Glover said.

"Even when opportunity comes knocking in some of these neighborhoods, people have learned to keep to themselves," Glover said. "Say somebody with PG&E walks up and tells you that you could get low-income utility rates in your home. A lot of people have the experience of going through all the conversation and all the paperwork, and then in the end it's, 'Oh, sorry, you don't qualify.'"

"People deal with so much rejection, from credit cards to colleges to job applications. From the Internet they can feel more hidden; it's a power that teaches people by letting them avoid embarrassment."

The center, run by Oakland Citizen's Committee for Urban Renewal, is 12 years old but was forced to move to 6948 Foothill Blvd. after new landlords more than doubled their rent a year or two ago, an administrator said. The new facility did a soft opening in April, beginning to teach free computer classes again, but will make it official in an event today with guests including Mayor Ron Dellums and Councilmember Desley Brooks.

If you go

What: Grand Opening of Eastmont Technology Center

When: 11 am to 2 pm

Cost: Free

Includes: Reception; music and dance performances by the Oakland Youth Orchestra, the East Oakland School of the Arts and Castlemont High School Choir; keynote speaker Dr. Randal Pinkett, the first African American to win on the TV show "The Apprentice."

Information: (510) 382-0555, www.occurnow.org