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Teen program combines hobbies, job skills

OUR FAMILIES

By **TINA HUANG**
Tribune Staff Writer

SOUTH BEND -- In a computer lab at the Robinson Community Learning Center, Dexter Brown, 15, types in the address for Lisa "Left Eye" Lopes' official Web site -- one of his favorites -- and describes the Flash program used to create the site's interactive features.

A technology enthusiast, Brown already has ideas for the Web site that he and his digital media classmates are going to create: photos with biographies of the teens, video clips and background music.

Brown's digital media class is one of 10 applied learning programs sponsored by Ark Angels, a not-for-profit organization that helps teenagers ages 13 to 18 combine hobbies with career development.

The organization's programs are a positive experience that could translate into a "leg up" in college or the job market.

Now in its second year, Ark Angels has enrolled some 200 teenagers at the Robinson Center, 921 N. Eddy St.

So far, Ark Angels has been funded almost entirely through private contributions, although it has applied for several grants, Ron King, founder and director of Ark



Jacenta Jackson, left, 15, of South Bend reads a "belief statement" about what it means to be a woman, as Girls to Women leader Natalie Lott, right, places the other statements on the table. Girls to Women is part of Ark Angels, a not-for-profit organization operating at the Robinson Community Learning Center in South Bend.

Tribune Photo/SANTIAGO FLORES

Angels, said.

The organization plans to expand and become more involved with South Bend schools, but about 90 percent of the programs will take place outside of school, King said.

Although most of the teens who come to the Robinson Center aren't at risk of getting into trouble, "for a few, yeah, the program is helping. I think it will help save a few kids," Penny Woods, the fine arts coach, said.

"They're off the streets for a couple of hours, and then they're doing something they like," she continued.

"I'm just really fascinated with high-tech stuff," Brown said. "I just learned it on my own. You can do so much with it."

Brown's main interest is photography, but Web design could be a valuable skill for him in the future.

"You guys need to get it because it could be the difference between getting a \$10,000-a-year job and a \$30,000-a-year job," King told the digital media students while helping them brainstorm ideas for the Web site.

James Thurston, the digital media coach, said Web design technology is "something we can teach them so they can put it on their résumés."

The other nine programs, which range from video production to creative writing, are led by 17 volunteer coaches.

"One part is that it's something they may not be getting in school. The other part is that even if it's something the child is getting in school, (Ark Angels) has the resources to help the child take it further," he said.

"We're not in competition with Boys & Girls Club and other organizations. We're actually a supplement to those organizations," King said.

The concept of applied learning means that most of the programs have some kind of "real world" application.

When King founded the organization in 2001, he asked the teens what kinds of programs they wanted at the center.

Although King chose programs that would appeal to the teens' interests, he said the programs are about more than having fun.

"There is definitely an element that goes beyond them just spending time," he said. "It's an investment of time. Even though they may come in for the reason that it's something

they like to do, the goal is to get them to take it seriously."

Besides providing potential job-training skills, some of Ark Angels' teen programs are about building character.

This aspect of Ark Angels focuses on bringing teens to the Robinson Center "instead of them being out on the street or doing drugs," said Vincenzo Carrasco, an Americorps volunteer who coordinates activities at the center.

At a Wednesday evening program called Girls to Women, teenage girls gather at the center to discuss issues. Self-esteem often figures prominently at these meetings.

The discussions, including topics on personal relationships, sex education and responsibilities, "help girls get a better understanding of who they are, coming to a knowledge of what they believe, what they value and who they are from within," Natalie Lott, who leads Girls to Women, said. Although the Girls to Women class is still in its first year, "right now we're seeing some very positive growth in these girls," said Lott, based on several informal assessments she has made for the past 10 weeks.

"These girls are here because they want to be here," she continued.

Latangela Avance, 17, started attending the group discussions six months ago after her mother told her about Girls to Women.

Avance said she goes to the Robinson Center "because it keeps me out of trouble. I can spend more time with my cousin."

King facilitates a similar program called Boys to Men that meets at the same time as Girls to Women.

He said the Boys to Men and Girls to Women programs are usually the starting point for most of the teens before they move on to the applied learning programs.

Staff writer Tina Huang:

thuang@sbtinfo.com