



COMMISSIONER'S CORNER

Digital Inclusion

BY CARL RICHIE JR.

"I took the computer class to learn and to teach others. You get information and you give it to other people. You don't keep it to yourself. You share it."

- Deirdre, HACA resident. Deirdre learned to use Google Docs to store her résumé, to attach her résumé to email, and to post it to online job boards.

FOR MARILYN THOMPSON, earning a free refurbished computer after moving in to the Housing Authority of the City of Austin's (HACA) Georgian Manor Apartments is a testament to the positive impact she has seen HACA's non-profit subsidiary Austin Pathways make in the lives of low-income Austinites.

Thompson, mother of a high school junior enrolled in college classes, spent six weeks enrolled in the Tech Starters digital literacy class, a program offered by

Austin Free-Net, to help HACA residents become more self-sufficient through digital inclusion. Thompson, like many of her classmates, registered for the class to earn a free computer so her son could stop going "from place to place, worrying, wondering, will there be time for him to type out his homework and submit it."

"He's going to need his education," Thompson said. After taking the class, Thompson gained confidence. At the suggestion

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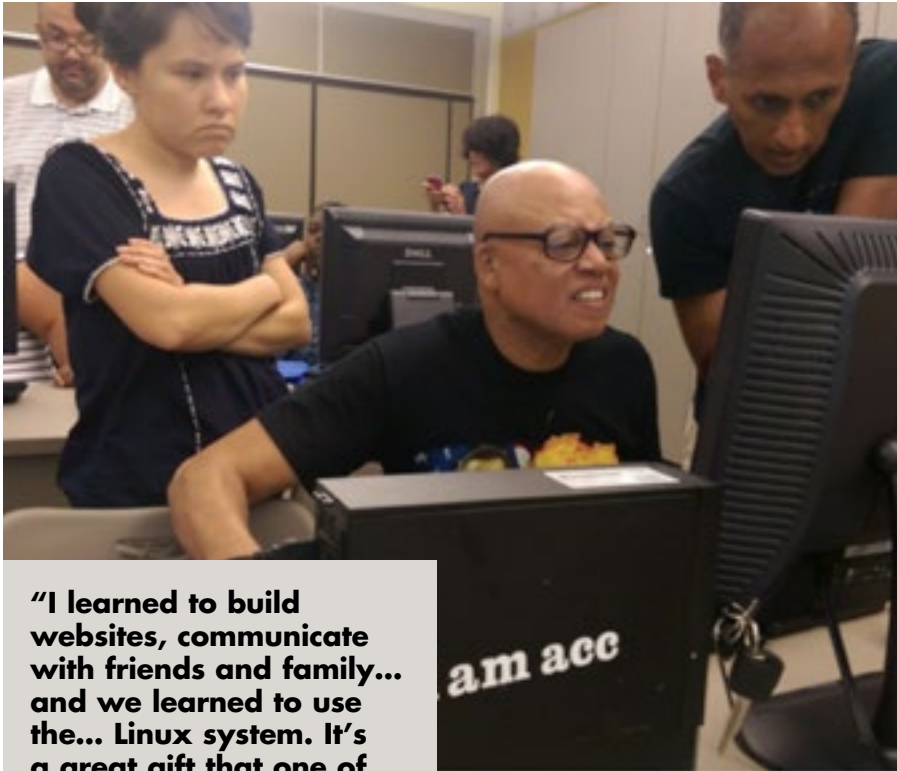
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"I learned to build websites, communicate with friends and family... and we learned to use the... Linux system. It's a great gift that one of the end products of this program is that each of us is able to walk home with our own fantastic desktop!"

– Ron Brown, HACA resident. Brown, pictured here with volunteer Unni Krishnan, who helped install software and content on the refurbished devices donated by Austin Community College, and Robin Medina, Austin Free-Net Tech Starter instructor.

of a Resident Opportunity and Self-Sufficiency (ROSS) services coordinator she now plans to enroll in the Health Information Technology Degree program at Austin Community College in the fall.

Austin Free-Net and Google Fiber are part of *Unlocking the Connection*, a locally-driven initiative led by HACA's non-profit subsidiary, Austin Pathways, and supported by more than 20 com-

munity partners, to bring affordable Internet access, computers and training to more than 4,300 public housing residents of all ages who live in HACA's 18 housing developments.

"Public housing residents are in critical need of the connection, skills, knowledge and devices needed to access the meaningful, life-changing opportunities that technology brings," said HACA President and CEO Michael Gerber. "Equitable access to technology can directly translate into workforce development, education, social inclusion, health and civic engagement opportunities for our residents."

In November 2014, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Secretary Julián Castro and Google Fiber helped HACA and Austin Pathways launch the first-of-its-kind initiative to bridge the city's digital divide and help

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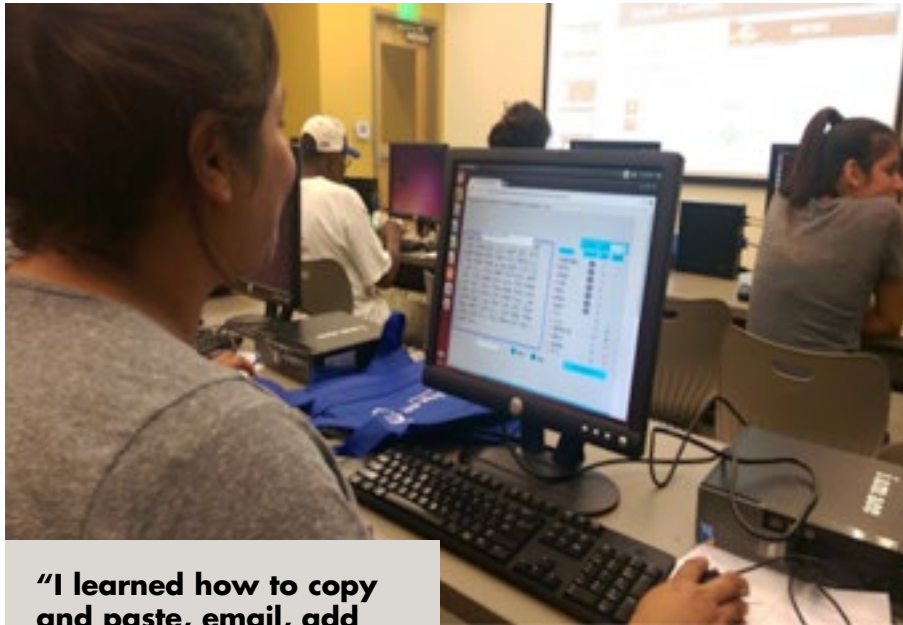
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"I learned how to copy and paste, email, add attachments, how to set up a computer. I learned that I have all of this information for free. My favorite is the Typing Tutor. A lot of jobs require 30 words per minute. I'm only at 23. But I'll catch up!"

- Erica, single mom of four children. Erica has registered for free basic broadband from Google Fiber. Erica will use her computer to monitor children's schoolwork and communicate with teachers on the Austin ISD Internet portal.

families build skills that support economic independence and transitioning from public assistance.

"Closing the digital divide means that every child has a chance to succeed in the 21st century global economy," Castro said. "This public-private collaboration means that more families will experience the benefits of broadband access. I commend The Housing Authority of the City of Austin, Google Fiber and key community partners for coming

together to expand opportunity for others. Their work should serve as a model for other public housing agencies and businesses to follow."

The choice between paying for essentials such as medication, utilities and food or the Internet is common for public housing residents. Texas school children must take standardized technology tests; job seekers spend hours applying for jobs by going from business to business; people with disabilities and seniors increasingly struggle to access medical information or simply make appointments.

Since *Unlocking the Connection* began, more than 60 residents from several HACA properties have participated in digital literacy training, learning how to use the Internet to search and apply for jobs, check school grades online, connect with friends and family via email, or use social media to promote a small business. About 80 percent of residents have signed up to receive free basic broadband Internet for

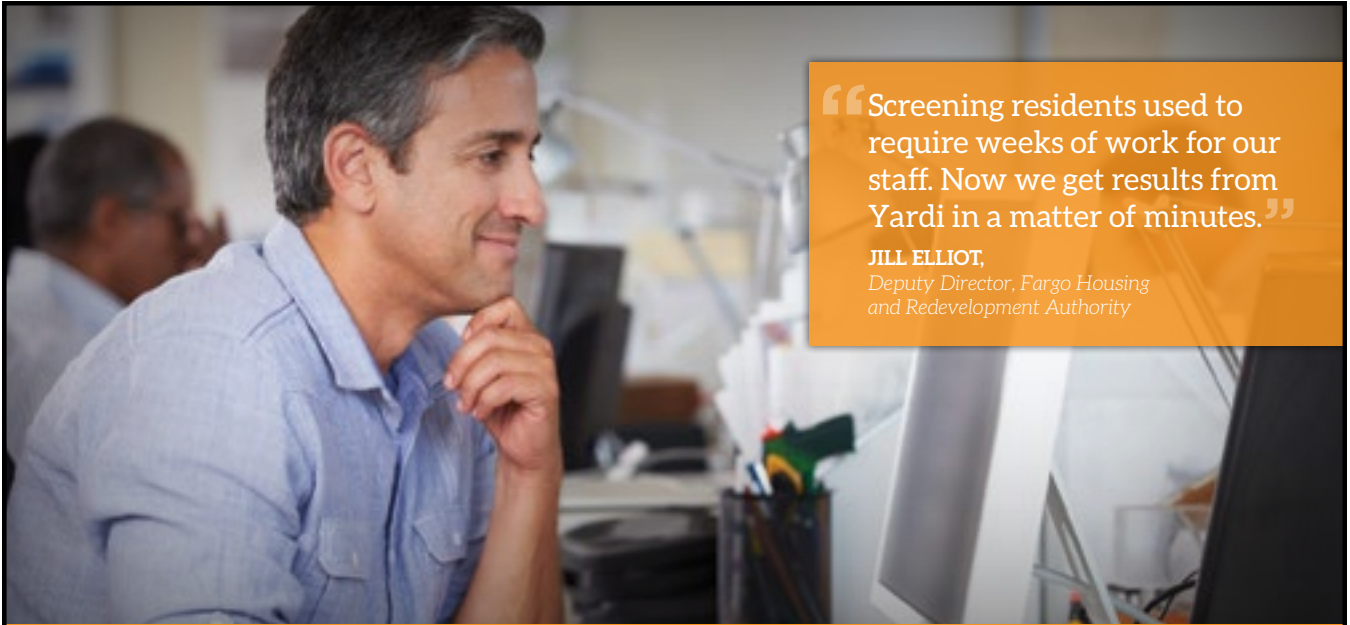
10 years, through a partnership with Google Fiber.

In addition, 40 public housing residents, including Armando Baladez, a graduate of the first Tech Starters class at HACA's Manchaca Village Apartments in south Austin, have earned free, refurbished computers as a result of their hard work.

"Everything is on the computer," Baladez said. "To learn it, to know it -- it's a benefit because we can look for either employment or education. It's almost like 'a must' to have a computer."

Baladez, who previously strove to start his own landscaping business, enjoyed his Tech Starters experience so much that he has become an assistant instructor with Austin Free-Net, earning a small stipend each month. Eventually, he'd like to pursue a career in the technology field.

Austin Pathways also hopes to inspire school-age public housing residents to strive for similar career paths through an innovative summer science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) pilot program made possible by a grant from the Central Texas Summer STEM Funding Collaborative in partnership with Skillpoint Alliance a non-profit that works with industry and educators to meet employers' needs for a qualified and skilled workforce. The camps, which will run July 6 through Aug. 21, target more than 100 elementary students age 6 to 12 years old residing in six HACA communities. STEM educators will deliver four computer science camps - with an emphasis on coding, tinkering and using micro-controller boards - as well as four camps focused on designing, building and racing a solar racecar. The latter will



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The pilot program will offer professional development in STEM education by providing eight high-school students residing in HACA communities an opportunity to participate in STEM education and leadership training and co-facilitate the STEM youth camps. Additionally, families who participate in the program will earn free refurbished devices, ranging from desktop computers provided to Austin Pathways by Austin Community College, to laptops or tablets.

To serve a broad spectrum of HACA residents, from early childhood to seniors, Austin Pathways recently awarded contracts to six digital inclusion service providers to offer a continuum of digital inclusion programs

for Housing Authority of the City of Austin (HACA) families, as well as measurable outcomes and lessons learned. Programming will range from preschool digital learning to afterschool tech clubs to basic and more advanced technology training for adults.

“Austin Pathways is excited to provide a robust offering of top notch technology programming for HACA residents, said HACA Executive Vice President Sylvia Blanco. “Funding for these programs are made possible in large part through critical investments from the philanthropic community, particularly the Ford Foundation and Open Society Foundations, as well as corporate leaders like IBM, Rackspace and Freescale, who share the philosophy that ‘it takes a village’ to narrow the technology gap.”

HACA and Austin Pathways is also in talks with Austin

Community College about a potential opportunity to work with student interns to provide technical support to HACA residents who encounter computer problems.

As a result of these efforts and burgeoning success, Austin Pathways was selected by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) – out of 25 housing agencies throughout the country that expressed interest – to participate in HUD’s Digital Opportunity Demonstration Project.

Catherine Crago, who leads strategic initiatives and resource development at Austin Pathways, presented an interactive workshop to help PHAs evaluate the business case for digital inclusion at the National NAHRO Summer Conference in Austin, Texas. We hope to have materials from the workshop available online soon. ■