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Hands-on access to STEM activities at LLLC Hackathon

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Photo provided

Free form, digital learning-the kind with no homework!-is on tap Feb. 23 at the Lafayette Library and Learning Center Community Hall. "Hack the Future 23" is a free, all-day extravaganza for youth ages 10-19 that offers demonstrations and hands-on access to STEM activities led by tech industry professionals.

Presented by learningtech.org and led by volunteers of Tri Valley-based Hack the Future, support from the Friends of Lafayette Library, LLLC Foundation and Contra Costa County library system provides lunch, T-shirts and multiple activity stations. Programming in JavaScript, Unity, Scratch, Python, C++, Chatbot; as well as exploration of virtual reality, soldering, micro:bit, raspberry pi and 3D Printing offer opportunity to sample the latest software and hardware technology.

"Digital literacy has become important to libraries as we have seen the dependence on computer and electronics increase in the workplace, schools and in the home," says Teen Services Library Assistant Orlando Guzman. Understanding and facility with emerging technologies, Guzman emphasizes, has become not only a passion for many people, but an expected skill in the 21st century.

Library programs that allow students to tinker in non-academic settings without the pressure of grades invite them to take new risks or develop deeper understanding of prior interests. Enthusiasm for the after-school or holiday workshops has grown enough to cause a remodeling of the library's computer technology lab into a more open, collaborative classroom and maker space.

"The library has become a free place to explore all (digital literacy) with books, DVDs, online resources, guest speakers, and workshops to learn new skills and acquire a basic understanding," says Guzman. Especially for youth, he says concepts involved with robotics, coding, 3D printing and other tech activities simultaneously encourage team problem solving and individual creativity. Free or low-cost programs open the adventure to youth regardless of economic situation. Mostly if not entirely untethered from fees and the "need to achieve," youth thrive especially in the game-like atmosphere of events like "Hack the Future."

Expecting about 70-100 youth to attend, Guzman suggests Hack the Future's attraction is attributable in part to the lively spirit, but also due to the organization's high-profile founders. "One of the founders of Hack the Future is Allan Alcorn, a founder of Atari and the creator of Pong, one of the first, if not the first commercially successful coin-op video game. As another fun aside, Al Alcorn also has the distinction of being one of Steve Jobs' first bosses.

Youth attending the hackathon are encouraged to bring their own laptops. Guzman estimates the library will have 20 available to lend for the day. For more information about recommended software downloads to install prior to attending the event, visit https://hackthefuture.org/software/. To access a required medical information sheet, go to https://hackthefuture.org/ documents/medical.pdf.

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