Tech Goes Home a big hit with South Boston residents

NDEC’s recent “Tech Goes Home” program was a big hit with South Boston residents. The eight-week course was designed for new computer users or for people who need to refresh their computer skills. At the completion of the course, students had the option of buying a Chromebook laptop for only $50.

Computer literacy is a must in today’s society. Offering Tech Goes Home to our neighbors in South Boston was a meaningful way for NDEC to show how much we appreciate their support through the years.

Many students said the class was a good introduction to computers. Although challenging, they said they enjoyed learning about computers. They also praised instructor Nathan Hoffman, NDEC Career Coach, saying he made the class interesting and accessible to everyone.

“A big part of becoming comfortable with the computer is establishing routines so that they become second nature,” Nathan explained. “A key component of the class is repetition, but I also tried to make the tasks relevant.

“When you’re comfortable with the computer, you take for granted things like saving documents to particular folders, creating hyperlinks, and creating tables in Excel,” he continued. “I think a lot of the frustration students run into has to do with the level of precision you need in dealing with a computer. Clicking just one centimeter in the wrong direction or missing a step in saving your work can lead to utter confusion. I do my best to remember that we’re repeating the same steps with precision in a way that’s still interesting and the value is clear to the students.”

It’s clear that Nathan succeeded. Students agreed that the class really lived up to its billing!
Extending outreach is an important part of Darren Stephens’ work

In his new position as NDEC’s Workforce and Partnership Manager, Darren Stephens is focused on extending outreach to other agencies and organizations to introduce NDEC’s programs and services, and to help recruit candidates to the Center’s programs. An effective recruitment strategy is paramount to meet the needs of the current tight labor market. “Successful recruitment depends on better interviewing,” says Darren.

As part of his new role, Darren liaises with local employers, colleges and agencies. “I like to stay informed with what the local resources are in order to match our students with the most appropriate employment or training opportunity,” he says.

Currently, Boston has a low unemployment rate of approximately 3%. “That’s one of the reasons I’m investing time in outreach efforts,” Darren notes. “I’m working on connecting with local organizations so that I can develop a strong referral pipeline of students into our programs.”

“Job requirements have changed since the last recession. The workplace is constantly changing,” he adds. “My job now (Darren formerly was Education and Employment Specialist at NDEC) is to identify employer needs and design curricula for industry-driven programs to meet demand. I would like our students, upon graduating from our programs, to feel confident applying for a job, attending interviews, and to be aware of the ever-changing protocols to secure employment.”

Darren also wants to work with employers that offer a clear career pathway for their employees and provide opportunities to be mobile within the organization. “We’re trying to get people out of that revolving door of low-paying work and into a job that pays a living wage with the promise of mobility,” he says.

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Career Coach Nathan Hoffman helps students stay focused on their goals

“I’ll do anything. I just want a job.”

NDEC Career Coach Nathan Hoffman often hears that from job-seeking students. “I get that,” he says, “But my role is to place them in the right job, not just any job.”

To that end, Nathan spends a lot of time helping students to set goals and clarify their career plans. “I’ll ask them to break their big goal—getting a job—into short-term, medium-term, and long-term plans. I often ask, ‘What can you do in the next week that will lead to your goal?’ It could be something educational, it could be career-related. It’s important to keep students moving forward.”

While students are identifying their goals and thinking about the type of job that will suit them best, Nathan is busily looking for appropriate positions. “First I think about my connections in the job or in the industry,” he says. “I also look to see if other NDEC students are working in the same place, because students can be a great resource for one another.”

He adds that two different students can be in the same job and have two very different experiences. “Sometimes it’s as simple as, the job requires them to work night shift and they’re not a night person, whereas another student will do quite well in that role. You want to be happy in your work, and you also want to remember that no job is perfect.” After placement, Nathan keeps in touch by calling or emailing students every few months.

Increasingly, says Nathan, companies are looking for technical skills. “It’s great that NDEC offers programs that bridge that gap,” he says, citing the popular Tech Goes Home sessions. “Sometimes older job seekers feel like they’re behind in their tech skills, and that’s going to make it hard for them to get hired. It’s rewarding to alleviate that for them.”

In addition to classes like Customer Service and Office Skills and Technology, Nathan also leads interview workshops. “It’s by far the largest looming fear of students—going on a job interview,” he says. “The interview process is nerve-wracking, so we spend a week studying best practices and conducting mock interviews. I tell students to make all their mistakes in class!”

Since many NDEC students come from different cultures, Nathan emphasizes non-verbal communication. “Eye contact, shaking hands, and posture are very important, and what’s appropriate differs from culture to culture. We work on all those things.”

Nathan also tells students to be prepared for anything in an interview. He maintains a file of common interview questions, and also has an “Interview Question of the Day,” where students formulate a question and write an answer to it. They then share with the rest of the class, and Nathan offers his feedback on the answers.

“The interview question students seem to dread the most is, ‘What is your greatest weakness?’ My advice is, be honest and be prepared. When you answer a question like this, you should always end with a statement about what you’re doing to fix that weakness,” he advises.

Nathan has worked with students who held professional positions in their native countries. “It’s hard to tell someone at that level that they won’t be able to match their prior status,” he says. “I always tell them, sometimes you have to take a step back in order to take a step forward. Fortunately there are community agencies that ‘translate’ degrees or certifications from other countries into the appropriate American certification.”
We wanted you to hear directly from us about NDEC’s temporary relocation and the steps we are taking to secure our future in this neighborhood.

Our roots in this community go back over a century. The Sisters of Notre Dame arrived in South Boston in 1860 and made our mission “Education for Life.” NDEC was founded in 1992 with the express goal of fulfilling that mandate. We now serve hundreds of people through a multitude of programs, including our alternative high school, a youth program and workforce training. We are not going anywhere.

Although we are temporarily relocating, we are open and will remain open, continuing to offer classes throughout this transition and beyond.

It is true that relocation was not in our original plans. But two years ago, with South Boston real estate prices skyrocketing, our landlord announced he was selling our building. Luckily, we found the one developer who saw our value to this community and was committed to ensuring our survival in South Boston. He was willing to work with us and eventually donate an entire floor in the new building he is constructing on our original site. It was our only chance to secure a permanent home in this neighborhood going forward—so we seized it.

To get to this point, however, required us to better establish our long-term financial stability and come to terms with the fact that we could no longer afford programs without adequate funding. In trying to find the best solution, we prioritized the programs that have had the most benefit for the local community. After searching for other options, the board decided it would be most prudent to temporarily suspend some ESOL and Adult Basic Education classes.

Unfortunately, this meant not renewing the employment of 10-part time teachers hired for the 2018-2019 school year, and ending the employment of seven full time staffers. All staff affected were informed well in advance that the programs would not continue after the end of the current term. We understand the pain this notice caused, but we couldn’t foresee that this decision would cause disruption to ongoing classes and harm the learning environment. Because we had already fulfilled the curriculum in those classes in accordance with guidelines, we felt the best choice was to pay our teachers for the full term and wrap up early.

We will continue offering smaller and better funded programs such as Youth Education and Workforce Readiness at our new, temporary location. These are the programs that have most directly impacted South Boston residents. We are incredibly proud of all our youth and adult students, especially the South Boston residents who have obtained their high school diplomas and GEDs through our programs.

While the next two years offer some challenges, they also offer an opportunity to fine tune these programs and those we’ll offer in the future. Thank you to our staff and board for your leadership, and to our community for your friendship and support. We look forward to returning to state-of-the-art facilities at a brand-new 200 Old Colony Avenue ready to serve South Boston for another century.
Student Success Story

Brian Hottleman: A ‘second chance’ at success

Like a lot of young adults, Brian Hottleman thought attending a college-prep high school would benefit him when the time came to apply to college. “I like learning, so I did all right for a while there,” he says.

But the school’s high-stakes atmosphere and “two to three hours of homework a night” were hard to deal with. “My grades were decent, but I wasn’t doing my homework,” he recalls. “Then I lost my grandfather. He was a father figure to me, and I took it very, very hard.”

Brian says that was the straw that broke the camel’s back. His attendance dropped, and going to school became a chore. “I didn’t know what I wanted to do, and it was a day-to-day struggle just to get going.”

Eventually he confided in his student support teacher, Mr. Green. “He said I might do really well in an alternative high school program,” Brian says. “I checked out a couple of programs, including NDEC, and I decided to come here.”

Brian says the small class setting makes it easier for him to understand information. “Adam [Berndt, Case Manager] and Leslie [Feeney, Youth Education Services Program Manager] care,” he adds.

“They weren’t on my back, but they clearly wanted me to succeed and do better.” The extra support worked—Brian was named Student Speaker at the 2019 Commencement ceremony.

A Dorchester resident, Brian has been accepted at Bunker Hill Community College and hopes to major in computer studies. “It feels good to win,” he says. “I took the hit of my grandfather’s death and was able to recover with help. A year ago, it felt impossible to succeed. Now I feel like I’m getting a second chance.”
Students, staff honored

Adam Berndt, High School Diploma Program Case Manager, received the prestigious NDEC Service Award at NDEC’s graduation ceremonies this spring. Adam was honored for his six years of “outstanding service and undying dedication” to Youth Education Services.

A record 22 students graduated from the Youth Education Services’ High School Diploma and High School Equivalency Test Preparation programs this year. Student award winners were William Feer who received the Cathedral High School Award for his fellowship, service and academic achievement. Vianca Iris Aquino Zayas received the Academic Achievement Award for earning the highest academic honors. Ahmed A. Aden was the recipient of the Grit and Resiliency Award for overcoming almost insurmountable obstacles to success. Dave Buchan was recognized with the Career Pathways Award for his academic achievement and dedication to a career pathway. He is pursuing a degree in Architecture at Wentworth Institute.

Ninety-five percent of Youth Education Services Program graduates, most of whom are first-generation high school graduates and/or college-goers, have been accepted to college, enrolled in trade or vocational programs, or have enlisted in the Armed Forces. (All photos by Christine Durante.)
at 2019 Commencement

HSDP graduate Jenny Guzman had reason to be doubly proud—in addition to graduating from the High School Diploma Program, she has enlisted in the U.S. Army and is headed to basic training this summer.

It was a joyous occasion for Adult HISET graduate Maria Sousa, center, shown here with her family on Graduation Night.

Mary Rose Durante, Esq., NDEC’s Executive Director and CEO, with NDEC Ambassadors Ajeen Balata, left, and Seipel Hussein, right. Both Ajeen and Seipel completed the ESOL Program and plan to continue their education.

Manny Reynoso, Director of Corporate and Community Partnerships, with Youth HISET Program graduate Nyoka Jean. Nyoka, an NDEC Ambassador, hopes to study Early Childhood Education and Social Work in college.

Leslie Feeney shares Giovanni Alston’s pride in his success. Giovanni is planning to attend college to become an ultrasound technician.

After all students had received their diplomas, the Class of 2019 participated in the time-honored tradition of “turning the tassel,” a symbol of their academic achievement.
Olga Zuniga: Reaching her goals, seeing her growth

Olga Zuniga feels like she’s gone from rock to rock star, thanks to NDEC. “Before I came to NDEC, I felt like a rock on the ground, something that nobody sees,” she says. “Now I’m reaching my goals and seeing my growth.”

Olga came to the United States from Honduras. She spoke very little English, yet she was determined to build a life for herself here so she could provide for her children back home. Although her sister helped her get a job, Olga’s English was so limited, she couldn’t understand what people were asking her to do. “Life was really difficult. That’s what brought me to NDEC.”

Since coming to the Center in 2016, Olga has taken advantage of many classes in addition to English. She’s learned basic computer skills and has completed the Medical Terminology (now Healthcare Career Exploration) class, as well as the Office Skills and Technology Training and Customer Service classes. Today she continues to study English in the College and Career Pathways Program, and is also an NDEC Ambassador.

“Olga is a natural-born leader,” says Manny Reynoso, Director of Corporate and Community Partnerships, who mentors the Ambassador cohort. “She’s the type of student teachers dream of having in class. She brings energy and focus and gets the rest of the class energized and focused as well.”

“NDEC has helped me prepare for success in many different ways,” concludes Olga. “I’m glad to be able to share my story with others. I feel like a bird that can finally fly on its own, and I want others to feel the same way, too.”
Nyoka Jean and her father share a special bond. Her love for him set him back on the path to health. His love for her set her back on the path to her dreams.

Six months before she was scheduled to graduate from high school, Nyoka’s father suffered a serious stroke. Immediately, she left school to care for him. “My father is one of my biggest motivators,” she says, “He understands me completely. No question, I was going to nurse him back to health.”

The teenager poured herself into caring for her father. She spent countless hours on the internet researching medicines, exercise programs, and nutrition. “I did everything,” she recalls. “If people said something worked, that’s what I did. I just wanted my dad to get better.”

Nyoka was so caught up in her caregiving that she put her own dreams on hold. “I didn’t realize how long it would take for Dad to get better,” she says. “Three years passed and there I was, still in the same place. I was losing focus on my dreams.” Then one day, she says, “My father showed a little movement. It was enough for him. He said to me, ‘My daughter, I would love to see you go live your life. I’m good.’”

With her father’s blessing, she moved to Boston in May 2018. Her first order of business was to finish high school. Nyoka tried online classes, but they didn’t work out for her. One day, while researching high school classes on her computer, she came across NDEC. She enrolled in NDEC’s High School Equivalency Program last fall.

Adam Berndt, Youth Education Services Case Manager, says that Nyoka quickly emerged as a classroom leader. “She went out of her way to help her classmates, often explaining math concepts with great patience,” Adam says. “She participated thoughtfully in every class discussion, and she set a wonderful example through her attitude and effort.”

In addition to being an academic standout, Nyoka is also an NDEC Ambassador and will soon begin working with NDEC’s newly formed Alumni Association.

Recently, Nyoka passed the HiSET exam. “I used to be ashamed of myself for not finishing school,” she admits. “But when I got to NDEC, the teachers made it very clear that I’m not on anyone’s timetable but mine. It’s never too late to start.”

Now that she has her high school equivalency credential, the future is wide open for Nyoka. Once interested in being a criminal lawyer, she now believes that dream has changed. “I have a very easy time talking to people, so perhaps I’ll be a counselor,” she says. “I love kids, so I might become a family counselor. I would love to be able to direct kids into the right path. One thing I learned at NDEC is, you will never reach anywhere in life if you are too afraid to try.”
Busy Spring at NDEC

Leslie Feeney, Program Manager, Youth Education Services, represented NDEC at the City of Boston’s Youth Job and Resource Fair, which was held at the Reggie Lewis Center. This year’s theme was “Success Awaits. Come Find It!” The event aimed to connect Boston youth with onsite summer workforce development opportunities through such activities as engaging with employers, job placement, career development workshops, and access to organizations that serve youth. (Photo courtesy of Darren Stephens.)

Darren Zheng and Antoinette Lambert, students in Boston College’s PULSE service learning program, were just two of the BC volunteers who tutored NDEC students this year. They both taught English and Darren also tutored in math. Tutors like Darren and Antoinette support both teachers and students.

NDEC’s Youth Education Services, in partnership with Chase Bank, presented Financial Health workshops to students in May. The workshops covered topics such as budgeting, savings, and investment. Pictured here from left are Russ Llewellyn and Will Jaramillo of Chase; students Kenny Escobar, Carson Joseph-Ferrara, K. Carrasquillo, Vianca Aquino-Zayas, Kiet Tran, and Tien Hoang. (Photo courtesy of Leslie Feeney.)
Where in South Boston is NDEC?

Thanks to the support of our community partners, NDEC is holding classes at these locations in South Boston this summer.

NDEC @ South Boston Library
646 East Broadway, South Boston, MA
Workforce Development

Career Services “drop-ins” are Fridays from 11:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m.

NDEC @ the Tierney Learning Center
125 Mercer Street, Boston, MA
ESOL Learning Circle

Do you want to improve your English-language conversation skills? Learning Circle may be for you! Open to all levels (recommended for beginner to intermediate). Recommended for ages 18-plus. Participants must commit to entire course.

You can always find NDEC on the internet. Visit our website, www.ndecboston.org. Like us on Facebook, Notre-Dame-Education-Center-Inc; or follow us on LinkedIn (company/notre-dame-education-center) or Twitter @ndecboston.
NDEC development update

NDEC has sold the building at 200 Old Colony Avenue to All Saints Development LLC. The sale was completed in June.

“This sale and the redevelopment of the site mean that NDEC will be able to serve South Boston for another century,” said Mary Rose Durante, Executive Director and CEO. “We’re very excited about our future.”

This summer, NDEC is holding Youth and Adult Education classes at the Laboure Center, 275 West Broadway. Workforce Development classes meet at the South Boston branch of the Boston Public Library, 646 East Broadway, and an ESOL conversation class is meeting at the Joseph Tierney Center, 125 Mercer Street.

“We’re so grateful to our colleagues and partners for their support during this time of transition,” concluded Mary Rose. “We look forward to moving back into a brand-new building in the summer of 2021.”

An artist’s rendition of the renovated 200 Old Colony Avenue building.

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