

THE PROCESS IV AN IN-DEPTH LOOK INSIDE PJN'S JOB READINESS & COMPUTER CLASS

By Michael George

The Job Readiness and Computer class, held recently in March, and being held again for two more classes on May 9 and 12, 2011 at P.S. 125, 425 W. 123rd St. between Morningside and Amsterdam Ave, is one of the most informative and constructive classes that ParentJobNet conducts. With our commitment to serve the parents of public school age children, we understand the preparation and dedication it takes to prepare for entry or re-entry into today's workforce. Considering that the job market is getting tighter, despite government statistics that indicate decreasing unemployment, some sectors are actively seeking new employees, while other areas (service industries and manufacturing) are lagging.

It's clear however that new technology is the engine driving the economic train these days. The need to have a more specified and technology inspired skill set, in order to maximize job opportunities, is clear. To that end, possessing basic elementary computer skills has become a prerequisite to entering the job market. It certainly isn't a clear path to employment, however without them, a job seeker can, and will, flounder aimlessly. Potential job seekers will immediately find themselves on a rocky road, and, in a tight economy, that's a flavor you want to avoid.

The Computer and Job Readiness class exists to help narrow the gap between employment and unemployment for public school parents. After observing a few classes, held in the spacious computer lab at P.S. 125, it's easy to see two things immediately - the class is somewhat under-utilized and that the classes could be longer. Because the class is centered around two distinct, though intertwined, disciplines, it's harder to master the nuance of either. There's an old Chinese proverb that says "tell me, I'll forget. Show me, I'll remember, involve me, I'll understand." Class instructor Jerrani Stephens, from the Consortium for Worker Education (CWE) is faced with figuring out how make the truth of that proverb become a reality. Stephens, following a syllabus put together by the Dept. of Labor, does an incredible job but knows he could do even more, and for more people.

"This is a really good class for giving people exposure to computers," said Stephens. "I wish there were more people, and there may not be enough time. Between the computer and lecture I have one hour for both and it may not be enough time for everybody. I try to give each person some one-on-one time. Some people have some experience and there are other factors to consider, like literacy or reading capabilities."

Although the people in attendance pay rapt attention to Stephens when talking about constructing resumes, intricacies of the computer keyboard or how to construct or set up an e-mail account, sometimes the lessons are rapid fire, and may need more time to sink in. If the students aren't taking fastidious notes than some of the lesson is lost. That's not the case with all the participants; however, some have come to the class with more definitive goals and some computer experience. Shanghel Meighan, an expectant mother of three, came to the class knowing what she wanted to get out of it. Meighan, who wants to start her own business as a personal trainer, came to learn more about using PowerPoint on her computer, so she can do spreadsheets and create databases to help manage her clients and business. However, given the time restraints of the class, it was unlikely that they would get around to exploring such an advanced program.

"The class is too short for people who don't know anything about computers," said Meighan, a native of Belize. "The instructor could use an assistant. But this is a nice program. Lots of people do nothing and this is a great opportunity and resource to take advantage of because it's all free. Some

people come here and they can see down the line and become more focused. It's easier if you have a goal. But some people come and they're scared to do new things. We need to get over that."

Stephens knows exactly what she's talking about. Computers and technology have become such a daily and integral part of our lives, that sometimes we don't realize how much we rely consciously and unconsciously on them. Riding an elevator, driving a car, crossing a street or even reading (and writing) this article is somehow technologically possible through a computer. In other words, they're all around us, so there's nothing to fear.

"Some people are afraid of the mouse," said Stephens, describing the pointing device. "It can be so overwhelming, but I try not to take the mouse from [the students]. It's a tool and it takes practice. You have to get time outside of the class for it to cement itself. I only have two hours and just spending one hour on the computer, you haven't done much. There's only so much you can do in class, but people don't realize that they are smarter than they think."

I believe that to be true. I think that with more instruction and time that the participants in the Computer and Job Readiness classes can handle more than just being told and shown. I believe that if they're more involved, which will come with longer classes, that the participants will come to understand the need to take advantage of what PJN is offering. Chester Flanders, 57, one of the few men in the class, keeps it real when it comes to his reasons for being there and what he faces in the minefield we call the job market.

"I need a job and I have to get some skills back," said Flanders, whose job in construction and maintenance didn't require knowing what a computer mouse was. "There are so many people out of work, even people who have [computer] skills are having a hard time.

"It's hit or miss. Sometimes it just seems like who you know will make a difference, and some people who have jobs don't want to do them. They need to have a class like this on a regular basis. People need this to sharpen their skills and it's definitely beneficial. Nobody is going to just hand you something."

PJN will continue to look for ways to improve, tweak and create opportunities through classes like Computers and Job Readiness. The commitment and dedication to providing parents the tools needed to close the ever-growing digital divide, and prepare for a tightening economy, are there to be used. Let's continue to maximize our efforts and we all might just learn something.

For more information or questions call PJN at 212-362-2735 or 917-546-9104. Or e-mail us at info@parentjobnet.org.