

PVNET Tech Support Team Takes Care of Business

By Michelle Fisher

In the 1950s, teenage boys learned how to build a car before driving one; today, boys (and girls) learn how to build computers. Same rite of passage, different vehicle.

Kurt Burian was just 14 years old when he applied for an internship at Palos Verdes on the Net. He knew the basics of how to use popular software on a computer, but not how it worked. Three years later, he is one third of the computer center's technical support team. Senior technician Andrew Kan, 21, and Dan Logan, 20, are the other two thirds.

"I'm learning how to maintain a large and complex computer network. At the center, you learn by doing," Kurt says. "I watch Andrew and take notes."

Although Kurt already acquired some software and hardware experience through the internship program, he received a crash course in it this summer with Andrew, who works at the center during summer vacation, school breaks and weekends.

"The kids who are here longer show the newer kids the ropes, and a few adult professionals, such as Kevin Hamilton, also act as mentors when needed," says Ted Vegvari, director of the nonprofit computer center located in Rancho Palos Verdes. "When Andrew first came here, he was so shy, he really tried to avoid working with anybody. He didn't just like computers-he loved computers. He was eager for the opportunity to work on them. He started off with very basic tasks and was a fast learner. His Mentor was Hoon Kim."

Six years later, Andrew is the center's senior technician, a job that requires him to work closely with others. "You can't do this without having very good people skills," says Vegvari. "When most kids come here, they're shy and unsure of themselves. After a couple of years here, they enjoy responsibility and are eager to show their stuff."

Jean Etter, coordinator of work experience education and internships at Palos Verdes Peninsula High School, has worked closely with Ted since PVNET opened its doors in 1996. This summer, she sent about 20 students to the center to explore their burgeoning interest in computers.

"Interns not only get the use of the computers, but they get hands-on training on the inner workings of the computers. They're getting experience that is so valuable," Etter says.

"They're exposed to so many areas and they decide which area they want to go into, whether it's programming, hardware, networking, or setting up web pages or something else."

Adds Etter, "Ted has equipment and software which isn't available at any of our schools and he has the knowledge, too."

For Andrew, the best part of being a PVNET intern is having the most current computer technology at your fingertips. "It's cool because you get to see the latest and greatest equipment. We set up test beds for new and emerging technologies, so we have a basis for our opinions and recommendations. Sometimes we even get parts and products way before Best Buy has them," he says with a grin.

Kurt agrees, noting that even his prestigious high school cannot keep up with the center. "At school, the equipment doesn't compare to what we have here. It's usually a couple of years

behind," he says.

Andrew also works in the technical support department at UCLA, where he will be a senior this fall. Kurt, a senior at Peninsula High School, plans to continue working in technical support while attending college.

Both Andrew and Kurt assist in maintaining the computer networks at two local city halls: Rancho Palos Verdes, which has about 70 computers, and Rolling Hills Estates, which has about 20. Other clients include a local law office and a brokerage firm.

"Basically, when anyone walks in with a broken computer, we fix it for them. We're an excellent tech support place," Andrew says.

Before they get to work on clients' computers, interns practice on those available at the center. According to Vegvari, interns built every single one of the 54 computers and 18 servers at the center. He stresses that the center, though financed by him, truly belongs to the kids.

"This is really their place. It's like their garage or their workbench," Vegvari says. "My job is to make sure we have a place that's well equipped, interesting, and provides high tech education through community service. The kids' job is to come in here and have fun learning things.

"We're a technology candy store where everyone can try as many samples as they wish-anything."

Networking at City Hall

One of Andrew and Kurt's main responsibilities is to keep the computers at RPV City Hall up and running "24/7," as Kurt puts it. Under the supervision of Vegvari and Dennis McLean, the city's finance director and IT coordinator, the tech support team fixes computer glitches, installs new software and hardware, and maintains the city's Intranet, mail, accounting and network servers.

"When there's a problem with the network or workstations, we get technical direction from Ted. We go there, diagnose the problem, figure out how to fix it and stay as long as we need to until it's fixed," says Andrew, who works 20 to 30 hours a week.

According to McLean, the city established a working relationship with PVNET in 1998. During their Christmas break, he says, PVNET interns built the 50 workstations, as well as the servers, that comprise the network at City Hall.

"Some of the same interns that built the workstations also took part in installing them," McLean says. "The interns also give one-on-one training. For example, if someone needs training on Mail Merge, I give Ted a call and he sends someone right over."

When asked what it is like to work with teenagers, McLean replies without hesitation, "In a word, fun. They've taught me a lot. Because they started on computers as near-infants and they have such a strong desire to learn, their working knowledge of hardware and software is beyond what any of us knows at City Hall."

"For example, our campus network is comprised of distributed gigabit switches over fiber optic cable," he continues. "Not many consultants possess the experience that the PVNET

interns have in managing our high speed network."

McLean emphasizes that it is a win-win situation for everyone because the city saves money by contracting with PVNET, while the young interns gain valuable experience working at City Hall.

"By virtue of the interns' participation in managing our network, the city probably saves between \$75,000 and \$100,000 a year in professional fees," he says, adding that upgrades such as the one now under way at City Hall would not be possible if they carried a higher price tag.

Vegvari clarifies that PVNET is not a business. Proceeds from its contract work with the city halls are funneled back to the computer center, where 80% of the services are offered to the community at no charge. Although interns are not employed by the center, they do receive stipends commensurate with their skills and responsibilities.

McLean points out that the teens are also exposed to the complex human network that makes up City Hall. "Kids gain working experience with computers in a network environment as well as the experience of working with other users and interacting with adults as they help us solve computer problems," says McLean. "Even if they don't choose the field of technology later on, they get a jump-start working in groups and with professionals in the City Hall environment."

So what do the interns think about working at City Hall?

"I like to work with the people next door," Andrew says of the neighboring RPV City Hall. "It's an exciting environment which changes quickly."

As Andrew describes the interns' role at the city, there is a hint of pride in his voice. "It's not only the hardware that we support, we support city staff. We're also in charge of teaching them how to use the upgraded equipment and software," he says.

Kurt says this work experience has sharpened both his problem-solving and his communication skills. "I'm learning more about business and how to work with clients. That's a big change from working by yourself and not having responsibilities," he says. "I'm learning a lot more than I could at any other job I could get as a student. No matter what field I go into, I can use these skills."

Learning to Fly

Etter says high school students are drawn to the self-directed learning environment at the center because of their desire for independence.

"Ted will throw problems at the kids, and they have to solve them. They learn to be very secure about their own decision making. Sometimes in the classroom they are kind of spoon-fed and constantly waiting for direction," Etter says. "This is an experience I couldn't offer them for thousands and thousands of dollars."

Vegvari emphasizes that interns choose the areas they would like to explore. "The kids create their own roles of responsibility, and it's a matter of their choosing," he explains. "Once they're assigned a project or responsibility, they take it seriously. I don't have to say a word. On their own, they each discover their strengths and weaknesses, which enables them to make

intelligent career decisions."

Kurt's father, Joe Burian, says his son has gained a new self-confidence since he started working at the center three years ago. "I think he's matured a lot from the experience. He's been given very challenging jobs to do at the center, and when he fulfills a task, he feels good about himself. These aren't tasks normally given to a high school student. It's more like a professional job," he says.

"Ted lets them sort things out without making them feel pressured. The kids are really having fun-it's not just work," he continues.

Burian credits the computer center for teaching Kurt to believe in himself and to pursue goals such as getting a pilot's license. Kurt was 14 years old when he took his first solo trip in a hang glider. To receive his pilot's license, he had to take a grueling, four-hour exam that many adults fail. At age 16, he passed with flying colors.

"His work at the computer center really helped him deal with the pressure of that exam," Burian says. "It all started with the computer center-learning to do these things helped to build him up. It's helped him to feel better about life and himself, and enabled him to do better in high school."

For more information about PVNET's animation program or future screenings of "Kitchen Katastrophe," call 541-7992 or visit www.palosverdes.com/animation.