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Two of PVNET's brightest former interns shine in two different vocations

By Michelle Fisher, Special to the News
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Busy students often ask parents and teachers when they will ever use school subjects such as trigonometry or poetry in “real life” — but not the students enrolled at PV on the Net. Year-round classes at the Rancho Palos Verdes computer center teach students how to use the latest technology to gain skills for use now and later, including Web site and software development, computer networking, map design, database management and computer animation.

Financial analysis is yet another pathway taken by former PVNET intern Steve Lothrop. Lothrop, who was instrumental in opening the London branch of DRW Trading has been doing groundbreaking work in algorithmic trading for nearly four years. Algorithmic, or automatic, trading essentially mixes high-finance and computer programs, according to the software engineer from RPV.

Lothrop emphasizes that his two-year internship at PVNET prepared him well for the demands of both college and the workplace. After earning a bachelor's degree in computer science at UC Berkeley, Lothrop was snatched up by the Chicago-based trading group that recently sent him and another software engineer overseas to the U.K.

“This job is by far the most challenging software development I've ever done,” Lothrop says. “Algorithmic trading means writing software to talk with the individual exchanges, where they trade stocks, futures and options on commodities and financial products.”

PVNET is where he first gained experience in the business world, Lothrop notes, because of the large-scale technical environment and the mentor-mentee relationship shared with Ted Vegvari, founder and director of the nonprofit computer center.

“Ted treats interns like peers, not students. It really prepared me for the corporate world — in exchanging feedback and behaving maturely in a complex environment,” Lothrop says. “With my current job, my mentors are the directors, CEOs and partners. I pick up everything I possibly can from them and keep moving forward with the company. It was the same way with Ted.”

Former PVNET intern Derrick Auyoung has made a name for himself by working on films like the box-office hit “Avatar” at Weta Digital. Other computer animation credits that make him and Vegvari proud include “The Lovely Bones,” “The Day the Earth Stood Still” and “Night at the Museum” (with Rhythm & Hues). His latest project, “The Adventures of Tintin: The Secret of the Unicorn,” will be released in 2011. Like Lothrop, Auyoung also credits PVNET for giving him the right tools to chart his career path.

“I still rely on my familiarity with Maya, which I taught myself how to use at PVNET,” Auyoung says. “Also, I’ll never forget the fundamentals of working with others in a project- and deadline-based environment, all while trying to wrangle computers and tons of data.”

After 17 years of working with school-aged students, Vegvari believes that few parents can realistically assess their children’s computer skills and how those skills tie into their interests, which is where PVNET can make a difference.

“At PVNET, we continually improve our educational programs with an eye on the future. Our new summer courses target the optimal ages for students to learn specific computer skills, and summer is an ideal time for kids to gain new skills here, so they can do well in school and beyond. There is no other place like it,” Vegvari says.

Auyoung agrees that no other place could have given him the opportunity to create the award-winning short film “Kitchen Katastrophe.” After his internship, Auyoung earned his bachelor’s degree in computer science at UCLA (on a full scholarship) before working at Rhythm & Hues in Culver City. When his dream job at Weta required relocating to New Zealand, he did not hesitate.

“My proudest work accomplishment so far was writing a tool for animation that is very widely used. It deals with the transfer of data between the motion capture (mocap) and animation departments and is being used on most mocap-related projects,” he says. “It’s always exciting working on projects associated with such high-profile directors. Growing up with films like ‘Terminator,’ ‘Aliens’ and ‘The Abyss,’ I was always in awe of James Cameron. When I found out I could have the opportunity to work on a visually groundbreaking film directed by Mr. Cameron himself, I just had to go to New Zealand.”

As with PVNET, Auyoung emphasizes that it is not just his enviable career field that makes his hard work worthwhile but also the people around him.

“The greatest thing about moving over here and working is bonding with like-minded colleagues. We all love films, filmmaking and the whole process,” Auyoung says. “No matter how long the hours may get during crunch times, the quality of life in New Zealand ... as well as our fundamental love for the craft and continued, ongoing learning, more than make up for it.”

Like Auyoung, Lothrop credits his colleagues for creating a fun and challenging work environment. His job is both software- and people-oriented, he explains, since he must understand the software, interface with traders and manage multiple projects.

“I love what I do. What you put into it is what you get out of it, so the more I put into my job, the more I learn new things,” Lothrop says. “Right now I’m learning about Web-based technologies from people who are probably the best in the world. If I didn’t put this much into it, I’d get less from these people, and the idea is to get as much out of the experience as possible.”

Adds Lothrop, “I don’t think I would have gotten a world-class education in software if I hadn’t gone to PVNET. If Ted hadn’t built a center and had a vision for it, I wouldn’t have had these opportunities.”