Mentoring: The Gift That Keeps on Giving

At PV on the NET, interns learn by doing — and by teaching.

By Michelle Fisher
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When most people think of mentoring, they imagine a one-way flow of information from the expert to the novice. But, at Palos Verdes on the NET, learning is reciprocal and often life-altering as mentors and students gain new knowledge and skills from the experience.

Hoon Kim, one of PVNET's first interns who helped "build the place from scratch," recalls learning far more than the intricacies of computer hardware and software.

"Even though I knew a lot about computers, I didn't have an appreciation for how to go about teaching it to other people, making them understand what you're doing when you're working on a computer," says Hoon.

This skill comes in handy not only when working with clients, such as the Rancho Palos Verdes City Hall, but also when giving guidance to other interns. Hoon credits PVNET Director Ted Vegvari for creating a mentoring system that encourages students to learn by doing, rather than just sitting on the sidelines.

"When a new intern first comes to the center, depending on what he wants to do, he gets assigned to a project. The new interns and old interns work together," says Hoon. "At first, the new interns watch more and then it sort of transitions into everyone working together at the same time, at the same pace."

Hoon spent one summer preparing another intern, Andrew Kan, to assume his responsibilities before he returned to college. He took Andrew along on job calls and introduced him to the fine art of computer support — a field that requires people skills as well as technical acuity.

"I think I taught Andrew what Ted taught me: how to work with people, deal with responsibility and have accountability for what you do," says Hoon.

Two years later, Andrew took on the role of mentor as he taught intern David Tobias the ins and outs of computer support. David came to PVNET looking for direction after becoming disillusioned with community college. He'd always had a knack for computers and wanted the type of training that would lead to a good job.

"When I interviewed David, the plan was to take him in for a year or so and create educational and experience opportunities for him," Vegvari recalls. "He was a good-hearted kid who did not learn well in

a group environment. I knew that if I showed him something one-on-one, he'd come to terms with it. There are a lot of kids like this out there — *I* was like this.

"Because I understand how he needs to learn, it worked. Everybody here spent a lot of time with him."

Learning by Teaching

Vegvari says that mentoring was part of his original vision for PVNET when he set up shop five years ago. At first, he was the only volunteer mentor at the nonprofit computer center, but as the internship program grew, so did the opportunities for mentoring.

"The interns mentor other interns. It works great. That's how we got to where we are now. They share their knowledge, and they're patient with each other," he says. "When they're invited to learn something, there's always someone who knows more than they do, who mentors them."

Sensing that David needed direction, Vegvari created an entry-level program that exposed him to everything from programming and networking to building computers and web sites.

"The whole time, he was learning to keep a routine, to manage his responsibilities and time. We got him started along a path so that he'd know he could do all these things," says Vegvari. "He worked on projects that required him to talk to people while things were happening."

After witnessing David's progression, Vegvari gave him the opportunity to become senior technician in the fall of 2000. Andrew ended up showing David everything that Hoon had once taught him.

"Andrew was a great teacher," recalls David, "He actually tells you to get in there, and he may offer suggestions, but you're actually working on it yourself. You're not just listening — you're doing. Experimentation is the name of the game."

Hoon says he learned a lot from mentoring the younger interns, especially how to deal with different personalities. "Some people are enthusiastic, and some are harder to work with. Because of that experience, my interpersonal skills really improved," says Hoon.

"With mentoring, older interns are learning more about human management and relationship stuff while the younger interns are learning hands-on technical stuff."

Seeing the Big Picture

While maintaining and upgrading the computer networks at RPV City Hall, David found himself in the role of teaching city staff how to use new software. He says he learned from the best — from mentors such as Vegvari and volunteer Kevin Hamilton — and found it rewarding to help others understand software he had recently mastered.

"I saw a lot of changes in David," Hamilton says. "When he first came here, like a lot of people, I think

he had an idea of what he knew about computers. It was fun to watch him grow and really become aware of how much more there was to learn …

"He improved his people skills, as it were, tremendously. And you have to. Because a lot of times you're dealing with people who are upset and under duress: They may have a computer problem per se and they're in a sense of panic almost. You have to come in calm and objective and solve the problem."

Hamilton credits Vegvari for pairing interns with experts in the IT industry. "In Dave's case, Ted paired him up with a bona fide guru in one area, for example, an expert in Tidemark," he says. "It gave David an understanding of where he's at and where it's possible to go."

In the meantime, Vegvari was also giving David a crash course on how to break into the IT industry. "Ted's a phenomenal boss because he knows the intricacies of the business. He's very businesslike," David says. "He did a lot on the hardware itself, but particularly teaching me about the industry. So, when you finish the internship, you do your portfolio, you know what to expect and how the industry works."

David can barely contain his pride as he talks about preparing his portfolio and resume with Vegvari's assistance. "Within the first week or so, I actually had multiple interviews. It was great, considering the job market and especially someone like me, who didn't go to a four-year school," he says. "Employers are looking for people who understand software and hardware but who actually have the experience of working with it, which is what I got from that internship."

Vegvari sounds like a proud father as he describes David's current position in software support at Pro System FX in Torrance. "David works with a rather sophisticated accounting program and helps customers with problems and issues," Vegvari says.

"The changes in him have been multi-level," he continues. "He now has that concept of what is expected of an employable adult — he did not have that before. His attitude toward work has changed from having no skills to 'I'm now a professional, working in a professional field and I respect myself.'"

David's father, a retired rheumatologist, couldn't be any more proud of his son. "Before, I thought he was kind of wandering, but he really focused [at PVNET]. And he has continued to focus really well. He has matured greatly," Dr. Tobias says. "We really saw his self-esteem grow. This all grew out of finding out that he really was proficient and could do the job."

Rabbi Ron Schulman of Congregation Ner Tamid, who has known David most of his life, said he noticed a change in him this past year. "Clearly, the involvement at the computer center and the skills he's gained have given him a new confidence," says Schulman. "David was always a bright, personable young man, but he did search for his place and his self-esteem. His work with PVNET is clearly one of the tools that brought him through this process."