

Computer skills a friend in new land

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SAN JOSE LAB HELPS REFUGEES PLUG IN TO POWER OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

By John Boudreau
Mercury News

In journalism, headlines omit BE verbs and articles. Which ones are missing from these headlines?

Advanced Grammar Directions

Use different colored pens to mark the subject(s) and verb(s) in each clause. If the S is separated from its verb by a relative adjective clause, draw a line from the S to its V. The first sentence (3 clauses) is marked for you.

When [Jamila Mohammad Ayub](#) **saw** her first computer just a few months ago, [she](#) **thought it was** a TV.

"I knew how to turn it on and off," the 20-year-old Afghan refugee said.

Now she has four e-mail accounts, uses Microsoft Excel and other software programs, and maneuvers around the Internet like, well, any other 20-year-old American.

Ayub picked up the skills through computer classes run by Catholic Charities of Santa Clara County. The four-week lab training -- mainly for newly arrived refugees and immigrants -- is proof that information technology has the power to change people's lives. The classes aim to give people who may have never before seen a PC or Web page the computer literacy skills that are increasingly essential in the American workplace, even for entry-level jobs.

Since arriving in this country in May, Ayub has received assistance from Catholic Charities in computer education as well as temporary housing and English classes.

Computer skills for this Afghan refugee are far more than a modern-day rite of passage: They are critical for her survival, and that of her family, who are depending on her to help them navigate this new land.

Ayub is just one of the scores of refugees whose lives have been scarred and displaced

by ineffable poverty, torture and wars, and who win one of life's great lotteries: a chance to start over in the United States.

(One-half of one percent of refugees worldwide resettle in the United States. Last year, the United States admitted 52,000 refugees. Catholic Charities resettled about 200 in Santa Clara County.)

"People are lovely" here, said Ayub, who came to this country with her mother and siblings. Her father died when he stepped on a land mine near Kabul 12 years ago.

In the case of refugees like Ayub, computer literacy is a key to financial independence and success here, said Ellen Dumesnil, division director at Catholic Charities.

"It helps refugees access better jobs," she said. "It's critical."

"Some of these people come from places where they haven't seen a gas or electric stove, let alone a computer," Dumesnil added.

Because of funding problems, the charity's

lab in San Jose nearly shut down earlier this year. But Microsoft stepped up with a \$30,000 grant, plus software, and promised another \$60,000 if the agency can raise an additional \$30,000 on its own. The lab, which trains about 150 people a year, requires about \$88,500 a year to operate, and the agency hopes to expand its services.

Nearly 70 percent of those who complete the program find jobs, the agency reports. Since February, 62 graduates of the one-month course have found jobs.

Ethiopia to Iran

It's not unusual to have people representing 12 different countries, from Ethiopia to Iran, in the program.

"I have a great deal of admiration for the people we serve," said Dumesnil, who once directed the U.S. refugee program in Saudi Arabia. "They faced challenges we could never dream of. Then they come here and, by and large, succeed."

The computer classes are so popular that even when all 15 computers

are occupied by eager students, others ask to stand at the back of the room and observe, said Jasmin Alic, the non-profit's computer instructor and coordinator and a Bosnian war refugee.

Computer skills can mean higher pay -- perhaps 50 percent more, Dumesnil said. In fact, many retailers and other companies require applicants to apply online or through on-site computers.

Neophyte newcomer

Thomas Ray Paulino, 25, who came to the United States about 3 1/2 months ago after being arrested and tortured in Sudan, had never used a computer before taking the charity's class. He fled his homeland and worked as a house cleaner for five years in Cairo before he was designated a refugee by the United Nation's High Commissioner for Refugees and resettled by the United States.

In September, he landed a job at Fry's Electronics.

"I'm really happy," Paulino said. "My life changed. It was not like this before."

Ayub, once cautious and reserved, now exudes a quiet confidence. She smiles warmly from under her white head scarf as she details how the computer and Internet have expanded her world. She hopes to get a job as a cashier or, even better, work in an office, to support her family.

Her mother is illiterate and does not speak English. She has a sister who is disabled and two other siblings still in school.

"Right now, I have a lot of responsibilities," said Ayub, who has mastered English well. "I have to support them."

She has her sights on college, though. "My dream is to be a lawyer," Ayub said.

Paulino, too, hopes to attend law school some day. "I would like to be a lawyer, to give rights to people," he said.

Paulino added: "Now, I know how to communicate with the world."

[Answer Key](#)

[Marsha Chan](#)