

Statesville, North Carolina: Iredell-Statesville Community Technology Institute

Computer Training Program Puts Adult Learners on the Path to New Jobs and New Lives



Injured in an industrial accident, Anita Gray, 55, is learning new technology skills and building confidence at the Iredell-Statesville Community Technology Institute.

Microsoft

Fast Facts

Organization:

Iredell-Statesville Community
Technology Institute
Statesville, North Carolina
www.sha-online.org

Program:

Computer and job-skills
education for low-income and
unemployed adult learners.

Profile:

At the institute's learning
center, adult students enroll
in evening classes where they
learn to type, create resumes,
send and receive e-mail, and
surf the Internet.

Program Impact:

About 150 adult learners
enrolled during the program's
first year. Many are finding
jobs or getting raises or
promotions thanks to the
skills and confidence they
acquired at the learning
center.



Community Learning Center Builds Computer Proficiency and the Confidence to Succeed

Winning a job or a promotion requires getting the right skills and the confidence to succeed. People with low-paying jobs—or no jobs at all—are getting both at the Iredell-Statesville Community Technology Institute in Statesville, North Carolina. At the institute's community learning center, which is funded by Microsoft, adult students learn to type, create resumes, communicate by e-mail and use the Web—and to believe in themselves.

The town of Statesville, North Carolina, an hour's drive north of Charlotte, has a vibrant business district and homes as pretty as those in any town in the South. But on Shelton Avenue, just off the interstate and on the other side of the train tracks, all of that seems a world away. The street is a patchwork of coin-operated laundries and shuttered buildings, repair shops and vacant lots.

Drive down Shelton Avenue too quickly and it's easy to miss the single-story brick building on the east side of the street. But missing it would be a mistake because inside that building, hope is being born. People who've been caught in dead-end, low-paying jobs and thought a better life was only the stuff of dreams are finding reasons for optimism. They're learning what they need to know—about computers, about looking for a job, about themselves—in that nondescript building with the grand name: the Iredell-Statesville Community Technology Institute.

The institute's community technology learning center, just one year old, has already trained four basic classes and one advanced class of graduates from its 10-week program. Those graduates—with an average age of 34—are finding jobs, earning promotions and discovering how to navigate the Internet.

In the process, they are gaining a newfound sense of confidence and possibility.

The institute is run by the Statesville Housing Authority in partnership with the county Employment Security Commission, Mitchell Community College, the Iredell-Statesville School District and the city government. The institute's program was made possible by a \$125,000 grant of software and cash from Microsoft—including the Microsoft® Office and Windows® XP software that participants use and funding to help underwrite the instructor's salary. Lessons are built around Microsoft products and technologies, such as Web surfing with Windows Internet Explorer® and sending and receiving e-mail with the MSN® Hotmail® e-mail service.

“Every Step of the Way”

“Microsoft has been there every step of the way for us,” says the institute's program manager Rudy Davis.

Microsoft is equally enthusiastic: “We believe in this program because it's clearly making a difference in people's lives,” says Michelle Thomas, southeast regional community affairs manager for Microsoft.

One of the people whose lives are different because of the community learning center is Dan Ervin. At age 57, Ervin found

Student Angela Bruce hones her typing skills in a computer class at the Iredell-Statesville Community Technology Institute.



Instructor Ellen Wass Beckerman checks a video presentation she'll use to introduce students to using Windows Live maps and directions.

himself divorced and unemployed within the space of two weeks. He had never learned to type, much less use a computer, and his job-seeking skills, after years of disuse, were rusty. His job search went badly. Then he saw a newspaper ad for the learning center.

"The first night I came, I was leery," Ervin recalls. "I thought I'd feel *that* tall," he says, holding his thumb and forefinger barely an inch apart. But Ervin was quickly introduced to computers, to typing and to creating a resume with Microsoft Word. His new resume and the confidence he gained in the class helped him to land a night-shift job at a local factory. He recently earned a raise and a promotion to day shift.

Ervin is now in his second set of classes at the learning center, where he's mastered the use of Hotmail and Web browsing. "If I want to take a vacation day or request something on the job, it all has to be done on the computer," he notes. "I couldn't do that before. Now I can." Ervin is contemplating learning to use computer-aided design software so he can continue to advance with his current employer, moving up to a design job from the factory floor.

Job skills aren't all that Ervin has gained from the learning center. He bought a computer so he could use e-mail to stay more connected with his family and friends, and he's been enjoying the convenience of shopping online. Even his social life is looking up. "I went onto Match.com," says Ervin

with a smile. "There are maybe 100 ladies in the area that could be right for me."

"That First Night Blew My Mind"

Zendarsky Mattison, 40, who works as an elementary school bus monitor, had tried computer classes before, without success. But she was the only member of her family who was computer illiterate, and she didn't want to be left behind. A newspaper story led her to the learning center. A full parking lot almost dissuaded her from entering and, once inside, her fears of another unhappy computer experience nearly led her to leave—but she decided to give the instructor 10 minutes to prove herself. It was enough. "That first night blew my mind," Mattison recalls. "I was so excited. It gave me the incentive to learn more."

Mattison has not only gained the confidence to use a computer on the job when she's in the school office, but she's also learned how to order medications online for her sick mother, shop online and e-mail her nieces—making her one "cool" aunt, in their estimation. She's also begun to imagine a better life for herself. "I'm looking for something in the medical field, like an office assistant. I think I can do that," says Mattison. "As I learn more, I'm more confident that I'll find a job that involves computers—I could never tackle that before. This program has afforded a lot of us the ability to start over."



With skills gained at the Iredell-Statesville Community Technology Institute, Dan Ervin landed a job at a local factory.



In 2007, Microsoft launched Unlimited Potential, which brings together the company's corporate citizenship efforts and many of its business investments to significantly broaden the reach of technology in underserved communities. Unlimited Potential aims to deliver the benefits of relevant, accessible and affordable software to the 5 billion people who today have no access to technology or the opportunities it affords, with a goal of reaching the next 1 billion people by 2015.

For more information, visit www.microsoft.com/unlimitedpotential

To learn more about Microsoft citizenship programs and investments, visit www.microsoft.com/citizenship

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Photos courtesy of Davis Turner/Getty Images

Ervin, Mattison and most of their classmates attribute much of their success so far to their instructor, a 5-foot-8-inch dynamo named Ellen Wass Beckerman. "Ellen is a ball of fire," says Davis, her supervisor. Indeed she is. Beckerman, a former computer consultant and database designer, teaches yoga to seniors and runs her own photography business when she's not teaching computer, Internet and job skills at the learning center.

"Before I came to the class, I was embarrassed and thought I couldn't learn," says Anita Gray, 55, who was forced to leave her job as a machine operator when her hand was crushed in an industrial accident. "Then I met Ellen—she's a wonderful instructor. She just teaches you to believe in yourself. If I'd had more teachers like her in school, I'd have learned 24/7."

Beckerman says she always respects her students—and their intelligence. "These are adult learners who have an understandable fear of the unknown and are embarrassed at not knowing what 'everyone else' knows," she says. "It's vitally important that I show them that I know they are smart people who simply don't have computer experience. It's equally important that I be relaxed and cheerful about repeating information and finding alternative examples if my first examples aren't understood." Beckerman finishes this thought as she does most of the things she says: with a big smile.

On a recent Tuesday evening, Beckerman and 14 of her students gather in the learning center, a large white-walled room lined with computer stations. Beckerman starts the session with a typing exercise. The room is

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—Ellen Wass Beckerman, instructor, Iredell-Statesville Community Technology Institute

mostly quiet, the silence punctuated by the continuous clicking of keys and the occasional cry of frustration or success. Beckerman goes from student to student, offering encouragement, advice and even a footrest to improve a student's posture.

Next, Beckerman asks the students to check their Hotmail e-mail accounts. She explains how to move potentially harmful messages to the junk mail folder, how to delete mail and how to preview messages before opening them. Students ask if they should open messages before moving them to junk mail (answer: "no"), how to know if a message is potentially harmful (answer: "look for the warning in the status bar") and how often they should check the junk mail folder (answer: "every few days"). By the end of the lesson, students are smiling, laughing and happily exchanging e-mail messages.

Suddenly, a deep roar penetrates the walls and the building begins to tremble. "The train tracks are 12 feet behind the building," one student explains nonchalantly to a shaken visitor. No one else seems concerned. Maybe they realize they've finally made it to the right side of those tracks.



Students Aishus Watts Jr. and Tyna Redmond explore the Internet during an advanced class at the Iredell-Statesville Community Technology Institute.