

STEM Minds helps today's kids tap into their digital and tech futures



By Brock Weir

Aside from the music, and vying for Top Artist at this past Sunday's Billboard Music Awards, there are other ties that bind The Weeknd, Shawn Mendes and Justin Bieber – all got their start as YouTube stars.

As YouTube and other online platforms continue to explode, more and more people are looking to see if they have what it takes to be the next online sensation. But it takes more than a good voice and a webcam to make it, and a new Aurora business is stepping up to give youth a flavour of just what it takes and to see if careers in digital media and other flourishing tech areas are right for them. STEM Minds, which stands for Science, Technology, Engineering and Math, opens its Earl Stewart Drive doors to the public on Saturday, June 3, with a special free coding workshop. Held in conjunction with Canada Learning Code Week, the 12 noon to 2 p.m. program will also include a free Minecraft Drop-In class to give families an opportunity to try out new programs and tour their new space.

"The sky is the limit," says Anu Bidani, an Aurora resident and Founder and CEO of STEM Minds, of the opportunities open to kids today through STEM.

Ms. Bindani established STEM Minds after noticing kids – including her own – facing a gap in York Region when it came to opportunities to gain the skills and tools they needed to be successful for the future and what is happening now.

"The future, she thought, was not only STEM learning in terms of knowing how to use 3D printers, knowing robotics, knowing how to code and all of that stuff but, more specifically, the thinking skills and the general personality traits that are needed for success," says Nicole Myers, Director of Curriculum and Business Development. "All children, regardless of background, and regardless of their family situation, should have the opportunity to have these experiences. Seeing that lack in her own community is why we decided to base ourselves in Aurora."

According to Ms. Myers, many people think STEM is strictly limited to robotics and coding, but that is far from reality. While STEM Minds offers robotics and coding, they also focus on app development, 3D design, web design and digital media – including "YouTubing for Beginners."

"A lot of kids have these ideas of what they want to be when they grow up and these careers are really new and really foreign to a lot of their families," she says of kids who might want to pursue a career as a video game designer, or a content creator on YouTube.

"They are totally awesome [career options] but people either deride that and think it is silly or, "Okay, cool, but we don't know how to support our kid in actually moving forward towards that."

Kids at STEM Minds will have the opportunity to create and film their own content and, perhaps most importantly, learn how to market what they create.

"Kids are so used to seeing this five minute video on their screen and don't really realise everything that goes into that," says Ms. Myers. "By the end, a lot of kids have a variety of reactions to it."

They are usually either "stoked" at the possibilities or "taken aback" by the reality of the hard work that goes into making content hit with that special target audience. Some kids might like the whole experience of video creation, others might take a shine to one

particular aspect of the production, such as video editing; and with that knowledge in hand, they are able to pursue their path forward.

“It is giving kids the opportunity to try things out so they can see if they like them or not, instead of being adults and realising the dream they have had since they were 12 doesn't actually suit their personality the way that they thought,” says Ms. Myers. “It is a chance to try it out now and figure out the steps they need to take to actually be successful in that thing.”

Whether you think you might have a career ahead of you as a YouTube creator, in coding and app design, or in science and technology fields making use of 3D printing technology, Ms. Myers says many of these opportunities simply aren't happening because there is an “initial barrier” where people are worried about looking silly or taking a chance. It is something she says she noticed at teacher's college and being able to be in an environment where those barriers are removed and they can have a positive impact on their communities is so rewarding all around.

“We can positively impact the school system to give not only students the experiences they should be totally getting, but also giving teachers and schools the opportunity to learn themselves so they can further support their students,” she says. “We truly believe that STEM learning is for everybody. It is not just about giving kids a good time, but giving them skills and experiences which have an underlying purpose to share with others and create solutions to the problems that we are facing in this world?”

STEM Minds is located at 212 Earl Stewart Drive (Unit 3). For more information, visit stemminds.com.