

Tech savvy grads set to Ignite Aurora's youth

By Brock Weir

Queen's University students are returning to Aurora this summer to light a spark of computer creativity in local youth at the Aurora Public Library.

Google IgniteCS is set to illuminate the Aurora Public Library in a series of two workshops in July and August designed to give teens a jolt of Java, as far as computer programming is concerned.

Facilitated by the tech giant, the workshop is a joined effort between the Library (APL) and two local graduates who are now working their way up the tech ladder at Queen's: Diana Dumitrascu and Diana Balant.

Through the workshop, teens will learn how to build small programs and get an introduction to larger concepts like data mining, and how to wade through the vast tech landscape to find potential career fits and emerging opportunities in the field of computer sciences.

"This is really different and really exciting," says APL's Reccia Mandelcorn. "I got an email totally out of the blue from one of the Dianas who were coming back for the summer and they wanted to run the program in their local library. When I asked them to come up with a proposal for us to see, in concrete, what they had, they came up with this fabulously laid out proposal. These young women are mentors for students to bring them into computer science."

It goes without saying that the APL is all for promoting all forms of literacy, including computer literacy, and this program is a further expansion into the Library reaching its full potential. They want to extend their focus to all aspects of STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) to become a "prime learning space, not only in terms of engaging and reading, but in terms of engaging in technology, computers and engineering."

"I am very excited about the fact they happen to be two young women in computer science because it is an area we're trying to encourage women to go into, but they will be programming and coding with young people, teaching them Java and Scratch, different concepts, and we look at this as part of what the Library is supposed to be doing: providing literacy to our community," says Ms. Mandelcorn. "But, we're taking it to a different level now. It was a gift. [The Dianas] are very excited about them and they are simply passionate about their love for computer sciences and where it can take them."

"The other thing I love is the whole idea that we have two young people leading a program with young people. I love the concept of mentorship and being able to engage university students to work with high school students. This is a fabulous partnership and something the Library really supports."

The first session will run July 18 through July 22 from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m., open to teens between the ages of 13 and 18. The second session, at the same time for the same demographic, will run August 8 through August 12. Participants are encouraged to bring their own laptop, but a limited number of Chromebooks will be available for use.

Since APL first started spreading the word about the upcoming program, the response has been enthusiastic, with many spots snapped up and adults wondering when they too might get a chance to develop their coding skills. Such opportunities are already being considered for next year when the APL hosts its Day of STEM.

Right now, however, it is all about the teens.

"There is so much changing in the world right now," says Ms. Mandelcorn. "Young women, for example, are getting more into the gaming industry, designing games, than ever before and that is a whole new area of employment. A lot of the service industry jobs are going to be replaced by technology, but all of the technology jobs are increasing."

?We need to give young people the step to be able to move in that direction and we also have to give my generation the opportunity to learn new things because we're going to need them for our jobs. Besides, it is fun!?

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