

A BETTER CALIFORNIA FOR EVERY PERSON IN OUR COMMUNITY



A New Path

Technology Nonprofit in Los Angeles Opens Doors to College and Careers

BY MONICA RODRIGUEZ

Oscar Menjivar visited his high school alma mater several years ago and found a noticeable gap in the curriculum. The South Los Angeles school lacked courses in computer technology.

The 2001 Cal Poly Pomona alumnus, who earned a bachelor's degree in

computer information systems, was convinced that technology provided a pathway to well-paid jobs and a means “to make sure our boys get to higher education instead of prison.”

Often, good boys living in South Los Angeles lack access to positive activities and instead follow a well-worn path to jail. It happened to a 16-year-old friend, Menjivar says. “He got caught up at the wrong place at the wrong time,” he says.

Those factors became the catalyst for Menjivar to establish TXT — Teens Exploring Technology. About eight years ago, he and a group of supporters began crafting a curriculum, testing pilot programs and researching how to establish a nonprofit.

TXT, which became a nonprofit about five years ago, offers technology-related afterschool activities to 800 middle and high school students annually from 30 South Los Angeles schools.

Oscar Menjivar leads a discussion with teens about problems in their community that need to be addressed.

Menjivar continued on page 10

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Among the programs is a summer class that teaches low-income African-American and Latino males how to write computer code and create websites and apps that are used to address real-life issues such as neighborhood safety. At the end of the program, the participants present their projects to a panel of tech professionals, and the winner gets a \$4,000 prize to launch a business. In a recent competition, one of the student-created apps used artificial intelligence, voice recognition and a robot. The app sends parents a message when their child has arrived at school or home safely.

Participants learn about team work and develop leadership, entrepreneurial and public speaking skills. They also learn that “the dreams you have can be accomplished if you put in the time,” says Menjivar, the organization’s CEO.

Recognizing his work in tackling a critical issue in California, the James Irvine Foundation gave Menjivar a 2018 Leadership Award and a \$200,000 prize that will allow TXT to grow the program. Menjivar was honored “for preparing young men and boys of color for careers in technology.”

So far, 75 students have gone through the summer coding, web, app and entrepreneurial program and graduated from high school. From that group, 71 are attending four-year colleges and about 60 are majoring in STEM fields.

Five TXT alums are attending Cal Poly Pomona, including 24-year-old graphic design student Victor Lara.

When he was a 10th grader at a Watts charter school, Lara taught himself web design because the school didn’t offer technology-related programs, he says.

At TXT, Lara found people who nurtured his interest in web design and also a mentor in Menjivar.

Lara, a junior, dreams of eventually opening a studio that creates apps and websites and gives youth a place to interact with professionals to learn about technology, much like he did at TXT.

At Cal Poly Pomona, Lara keeps in close contact with other TXT graduates and Broncos.

“TXT sort of brings this brotherhood,” Lara says. “It feels like you have this connection that never goes away.”

Menjivar says he too found a community of students and supportive faculty during his undergraduate years at Cal Poly Pomona. The former ASI vice president and resident advisor at Alamitos residence hall discovered opportunities to develop his leadership skills and pursue his dreams. At TXT’s inception, fellow Bronco alumni comprised its initial board of directors.

Menjivar’s training and life experience have turned him into an engineer of sorts.

“I’m a human engineer,” he says. “I re-engineer the talent of people and bring the talent out. I’m blessed to be a different type of engineer.”

The American Dream

Connecting New Angelenos to LA’s Diverse Community

BY CLAY FOWLER

Recent changes to U.S. immigration policy have complicated and increased **Linda Lopez’s** work. But it’s all the more reason for the Cal Poly Pomona alumna to stop and admire the impact of her position as the chief of the Office of Immigrant Affairs in Los Angeles.

Lopez (’92, political science) enjoys the fruits of her office’s labor at the dozens of annual U.S. citizenship ceremonies at the LA Convention Center, a tangible and emotional event for the newly minted Americans.

“It’s really powerful. You have 5,000 people from all over the world in this space, and they’re waving their flags, and it’s this moment, this culmination,” Lopez says. “For me, it’s really empowering because it’s part of the American dream. Citizenship is that ultimate culmination.”

Facilitating U.S. citizenship is one of many initiatives for the Office of Immigrant Affairs, which Mayor Eric Garcetti re-launched after he was elected in 2013. Lopez, the daughter of Ecuadorian immigrants, was one of the first people he hired outside of his immediate staff.

In a city where one in 10 residents is an immigrant, Lopez is charged with integrating new Angelenos, both documented and undocumented, into the fabric of the city. That mission has become more complex with escalating fears among the immigrant community, which includes people from Mexico, Central America and Korea.

Lopez shepherded the New Americans Initiative, which uses public libraries to guide Angelenos through the U.S. citizenship process. It’s been so successful that New York City and Philadelphia have adopted the model.

To help quell fears and improve collaborative communication, her office utilizes trusted leaders of the immigrant community to tell their friends and neighbors about the city’s programs for healthcare, accessing food and growing their small business.

A report conducted by Americas Society, Council of the Americas and the Fiscal Policy Institute shows that 64 percent of all “Main Street” business owners in the Los Angeles metro area are immigrants. Small business is just one of many ways they contribute to the community.

“They’re the local engines of economic development for our city,” Lopez says. “How do we provide the tools needed for immigrants to scale up some of these businesses? We’re thinking through a strategy that would help support that.”

