TL Tech Lab has trained thousands

Damien Ramos, *left, and Josh Farria confer as they prepare to train residents at Mercy Housing apartments in the Tenderloin, part of One Economy's nationwide program to bring broadband to underserved communities.*

PHOTO BY MARJORIE BEGGS

All express computers on the fourth floor were busy, too; one woman was waiting. Eighteen patrons were at the desktop computers while eight laptop users nearby worked, played or browsed.

Such usage was pretty typical for a Thursday, according to the librarian at the fourth-floor Arts, Music and Recreation Center desk. "But the weather's nice today," he said, "so it may be a little low. Sunday's always a huge day, with almost every computer booked."

Using their library card, patrons can book an hour on a computer ahead of time either from inside the library or from out-side, if they can find online access. On slower days, users can do "walk-up bookings."

Users are all over the page in terms of their technical skills. "They run from zero to very skilled," the librarian said. "But whichever, libraries have become THE place where anyone can get access to online information, and that's changed the way we do things. As librarians, we're book people, but we're also being called upon sometimes to do tech support."

That's okay with him: "A lot of people are using the place, and that's what's important."

After the library, the 2-year-old Tenderloin Tech Lab at 150 Golden Gate Ave., operated jointly by S.F. Network Ministries and St. Anthony Foundation, has the most computers available to the public in the central city — 37, all with high-speed Internet connection. Open Monday through Saturday, the lab has 18 computers in the drop-in area, 12 in the classroom and seven in the hardware repair area, used for people who want to learn to repair PCs.

Damien Ramos, from the Mercy One Economy project, was a recent repair student at the lab. Besides making him a more effective go-to guy for Mercy residents with balky computers, he hopes his repair chops will help him to get work when his One Economy contract ends.

On any day, more than 100 people either drop in or take one of the Tech Lab's 13 classes. Staff track every sign-in, more than 60,000 since the lab opened. And all new patrons are asked how they want to use the lab: 33% say to search for jobs, 17% to apply for entitlement programs, 16% to browse social network sites, 13% to build or maintain Websites and 6% to keep up online businesses.

Among its classes, the lab's most popular is basic computer skills, a three-week, two-hour, four-day-a-week session. Network Ministries Associate Director Salena Bailey says there's always a waiting list.

"I've seen an increase in the clients who have smart phones that they know how to use really well, but they have a hard time using a PC," Bailey said. "Social networking is big now. Our students are not only interested in the possibilities of connecting with others but have real, and possibly paranoid, ideas about privacy on Facebook and the Internet in general."

While the digital divide in the Tenderloin and across the country continues to be a source of concern, researchers are confirming that the have-nots — those without wired desktop computers and high-speed Internet at home — are increasingly turning to cell phones and wireless laptops to become "haves."

A May 2010 report from the Pew Internet & American Life Project found that 59% of American adults own desktop computers, 52% own laptops and a whopping 85% own cell phones. And to get online, more than half (59%) use either laptops or cell phones, up from 51% a year earlier.

Karl Robillard, St. Anthony's manager of communications and outreach, who operates the Tech Lab with Bailey, says they don't have any stats on wireless use among their clients. "But we have observed an anecdotal trend in our students asking questions about mobile and sms [short message service, better known as texting] technology."

The real divide may come from a combination of not understanding how to navigate the Internet, whether from stationary or portable devices, and insufficient trainers to help newbies.

Bailey says the biggest hurdles for the lab's new clients are deciphering computer lingo and their own anxieties about "breaking" the computer.

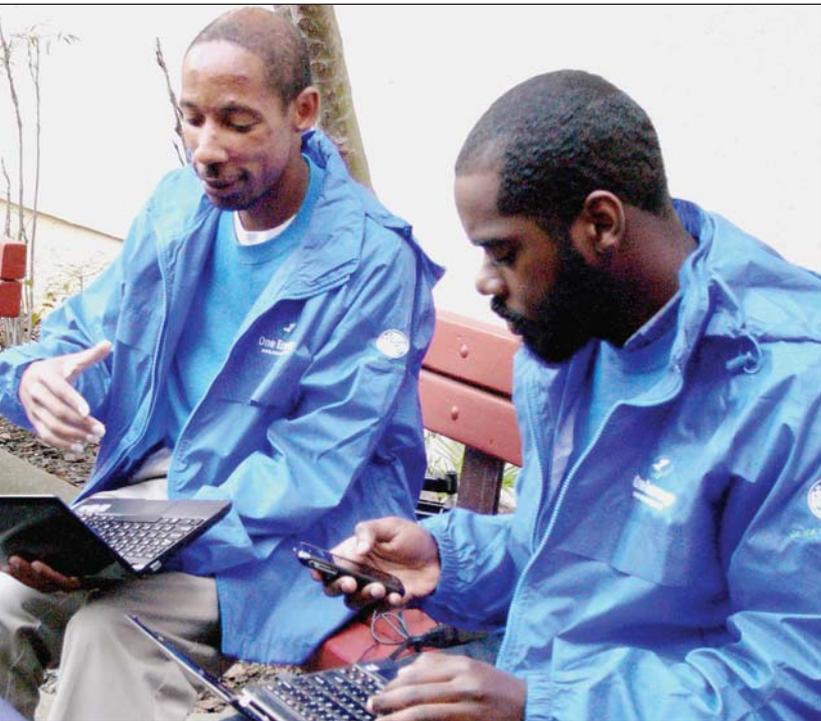"We always start our classes," she said, "with the mantra that one isn't born with the knowledge of how to use a computer." ■