

Arizona Daily Star®

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Published: 05.03.2007

Kickin' it at Computer Clubhouse

From rap video to Web sites, teens make it go

By Nathan Olivarez-Giles

ARIZONA DAILY STAR

Since he started rapping four years ago, German Vega has been looking for a place to record. But he never thought that place would be the Tucson Urban League.

"It was luck," said Vega, 16. "I was looking for a studio and I saw someone standing in the parking lot and asked them if they knew of a studio and they said 'Yeah, it's right here.' "

"Right here" was the Urban League's Intel Computer Clubhouse, which is home to a room full of computers loaded with thousands of dollars in software, along with a recording studio.

"Every day I'm in here I try do something new, learn a new skill," Vega said. "You feel like you're growing up — mentally. I didn't know anything before; now I can get on these computers and I can record in the studio and I do it all myself."

Vega, who goes by "EXS" when he's on the mic, found the clubhouse seven months ago and has been going there every day after he finishes his classes at Pueblo High Magnet School.

Michael Wiles, clubhouse coordinator, said Vega is a prime example of the clubhouse's untapped potential.

"My deal is, if you're going to listen to Lil John then make a beat, and if it's good I'll introduce you to Lil John," Wiles said of the famed Southern rapper. "I try to let them see the application of what they can do and learn here to the real world and the things they already do and enjoy."

At the clubhouse, kids can build their own Web sites and video games, create 3-D digital models of cars and edit video and pictures they shoot themselves, Wiles said.

"Really, the only limit here is your imagination and your drive," Wiles said. "This isn't just a lab for you to come in and check your e-mail and look at MySpace."

In fact, Wiles banned MySpace — a social Web site popular among teens and younger kids — from being used in the clubhouse.

"There was a period where it was: 'We hate Mr. Mike,' " Wiles said. "But the whole point is if you like it so much, make your own. Don't just be a customer; create your own social network."

Wiles said the idea that kids can create anything they want in the clubhouse has caught on with Vega and is spreading to other youth as well.

"We're working on an EXS music video now," Wiles said. "I tell the kids, anything you want to do, we can make it happen. Well, EXS wanted to shoot his video in a club, but he's only 16 so we're looking for a house with a pool in

Up in the Clubhouse

What: Intel Computer Clubhouse.

Where: Tucson Urban League, 2305 S. Park Ave., at South Park Avenue and East 33rd Street.

When: Monday through Friday from 3 to 6 p.m.

the backyard. Pool parties are a little more realistic right now than being up in the club."

Seeing what Vega is doing has been inspiring, said Daniel Trejo, who has been going to the clubhouse since February after getting into trouble with the law.

"The clubhouse gives me something to do," said Trejo, 13. "I would do stupid stuff before because I was bored; I never had anything to do. But there's a lot to do here, so I don't get that urge anymore."

Trejo said if he hadn't gotten into trouble, he might not ever have known the clubhouse exists.

"I'll be coming here for a while," Trejo said. "They have tutors here, and the mentors are teaching me football plays, and you can just come here and relax."

Vega also is recruiting girls to choreograph dance steps for his video, which will be shot for the song "Like That."

"I took some of my songs to Pueblo and played them for some people, and they like 'Like That' the best, so that's what we're going with," Vega said of his classmates.

Wiles said as soon as girls became involved in the video, a lot of the boys in the clubhouse started to take notice.

"Whatever motivates them, man," Wiles said. "But the girls know, just like the boys, you can do something for yourself and still get respect. So they're creating dance moves that they're going to perform for the video."

Wiles said the excitement around Vega's music is helping change the way the kids who go to the clubhouse view themselves in their environment.

"A lot of kids face a lot of hardship out here in the streets, but I don't ever let the kids let their situation and circumstance dictate their lives and their dreams," Wiles said. "We're making it cooler to be smart and to be able to do things with computers, and for many kids right now, that isn't a very cool thing."

South Side

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