

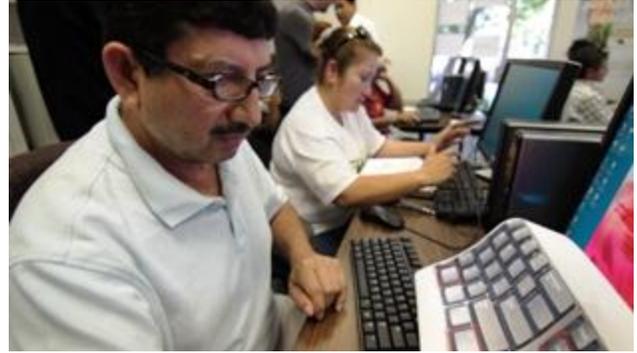
“Next to the great inventors, janitors learn the ABC of computers in Silicon Valley”

Radio Bilingue report, December 9, 2011

English Transcript: (for original in Spanish see:

http://www.radiobilingue.org/inmigrantes/reportajes/Al_lado_de_grandes_inventores_conserjes_aprenden_el_ABC_de_la_computacion_en_el_Valle_de_Silicon.htm)

Silicon Valley in Northern California is considered the heart of the high tech industry. It's the home of companies like Google, Facebook and Apple. In the same buildings where hundreds of engineers invent new applications for the internet or the newest model of computers, there are other workers who clean in the shadows, excluded from the majority of these advances. Our reporter, Farida Jhabvala Romero visited a class that looks to build a bridge to help janitors in Silicon Valley access its technological innovation.



In a small computer lab seven janitors are sitting down after a long day at work. Román González types different keys, trying not to look at his hands and only at the computer screen.

“First the “l”, then the “k”...”, Román says.

Román is using a typing program on the internet in Spanish. He is a very dedicated student; he says that now instead of watching TV at home that he now practices this program, and that he is making progress.

“I’ve gotten to only 12 errors. The first time, eight days ago, I made 92... And if I continue practicing I’ll get there.”

This is a new experience for Román, who lost his job as a janitor eight months ago. He wants to learn to use a computer because when he looks for work they ask for his e-mail address. He says that the computers in the offices where he cleaned were a source of curiosity for him, and that sometimes it also caused him and other janitors worry.

“Yes, sometimes when you were dusting nearby, one would turn on and you wouldn’t know what to do; you would worry you damaged it or something. I’d think, “perhaps they’ll fire me!” But then it would stay on I’d keep watching it to see if it would turn off on its own. And really nothing would happen. But it’s just that when one doesn’t know...”, Román lamented.

The majority of the six thousand janitors in Silicon Valley, the birthplace of technology, don’t know how to use a computer, says Margarita Vega from the Building Skills Partnership, an organization created by the Service Employees International Union or SEIU.

“They are there in Apple or in Google or in all these sites of the birth of technology and it’s incredible that in the same building where the creators of these technologies are, that they are interacting with people who don’t even know that the technology exists or how to use it”, reflected Margarita.

This is why the organization offers computer and English classes in hours when the workers can attend, like at 10p.m. on Friday night. Many have two jobs and don’t speak English. Some of their teachers are engineers at the innovative tech companies in the region. But also teaching classes are other janitors, like Miguel Cadena. Today in the class, Miguel is moving from computer to computer answering questions. Now he’s showing a student how to enter and navigate her e-mail account for the first time.



“Look where it says inbox and each time that you open your mail, that’s where you can enter to see the new emails you have. Go ahead and click”, Miguel instructs.

Miguel has been in California 13 years and he works full time in a factory. But at night he also sweeps and vacuums this building. When he first took the class three years ago, he knew nothing about computers, and he shares his own experiences to motivate other colleagues to overcome their fears. He also takes much pride in that now he can help his two small daughters with their homework on the computer, or can help them research things on the internet.

“I get to thinking that if I hadn’t learned to use the computer, I never would have been able to help them when they ask me. I don’t know much, but that little bit has made a big difference. ... Now they think that I am very smart, that I know so much; but it really isn’t that, it’s that I studied and now know something and can help them.”

At the end of the class, the student Román González reaches a new record in his typing practice. Now he only has five errors. He says that one day he wants to leave the cleaning industry for a job working from his house, from a laptop computer.