

Fresno teens get jump start with coding bootcamp

By Hannah
Furfaro



SOUL charter student Maria Candelario solves a coding problem as instructor Damon Thomas looks on in his Geekwise Academy coding class. JOHN WALKER — THE FRESNO BEE | [Buy Photo](#)

3 things to know about SOUL students training at Geekwise

- Students from SOUL charter walk to Geekwise Academy two afternoons each week for special coding classes.
- Many of the teens come from homes without access to the Internet or a computer.
- They're learning highly sought-after skills that could land them high-paying jobs in the future.

Deija Orozco, a candid 17-year-old with two lip rings, is casual about her hacking abilities.

"I'm pretty good at phones," she says. So good, in fact, she learned how to "jailbreak" cell phones after watching a YouTube instructional video. Now she tinkers on her friends' phones, freeing them from software constraints so they can customize their gadgets.

So when the Fresno high school junior was offered one of just a few spots in a professional-level computer coding class, she welcomed the chance to learn more about computers.

Hacking isn't part of the curriculum. But Deija and 14 of her [School of Unlimited Learning](#) classmates are getting top-notch training in HTML code and website design through [Geekwise Academy](#), a coding school in downtown Fresno.

SOUL charter school, just blocks from Geekwise's classroom, is "a last-chance kind of school," as Deija describes it. It's for high schoolers who struggled academically in regular classrooms or need to make up credits. It certainly was a last chance for Deija, who has a daughter and spent her first two years of high school in independent study, where she "really wasn't learning anything."

But on a sunny afternoon this month, she's all ears — and fingers — during her class at Geekwise.

The students are clustered around small laptops, keys clicking as they type out fragments of code and arrange their websites using [CodePen](#), a virtual playground for programmers. Instructor Damon Thomas is at the front, teaching about tags and links as the teens jot notes in notebooks.

The classroom, a sparse space with modern tables, is located in the [Bitwise Industries](#) technology building on San Joaquin and L streets. The hub is the kind of place where you sink into the comfortable lobby couch and shoot around ideas with professional developers on your lunch hour.

Or for SOUL students, during a break from their two-hour bootcamp class.

Deija sees herself working at a spot like this sometime after she graduates — from college, that is.

"I plan to go to college right when I finish (high school). I will not take a break," she says.

It's a statement most SOUL students wouldn't have made before enrolling there. Many live in poverty and have trouble at home or a history of truancy, said principal Mark Wilson. SOUL is part remediation, part reformation. Most students there have catch-up to do but also want a shot at finishing school and making something of themselves.

The partnership with Geekwise is making that possible, Wilson said.

"You begin to believe all of the things you hear about what you can and can't do," he said. "Here (at Geekwise) the playing field is leveled and that's the great thing ... nobody cares about your socioeconomic background, they don't care about what kind of clothes you wear or how many tattoos or piercings you have. If you can code, you can code."

Wilson said the Geekwise class runs \$250 a student, the same fee charged to community members and professionals who take the academy's night classes. It's a worthy investment SOUL is making in the teens' future, Wilson said.

For some SOUL students, the class could be a fast lane to a hugely profitable skill.

"(SOUL has) students with no Internet access, no computers at home, and so the ability to come in here and touch that technology in general is meaningful exposure," said Bitwise Industries CEO Jake Soberal. "The ability to learn that technology at a high level and do things that can connect them to jobs, opportunities and careers is really potentially life-changing."

Sophomore Raymond Royas, a fidgety 15-year-old who thrives in the class, said that because he doesn't have access to the Internet at home, Geekwise is the only place he gets time with a computer. It's awakened a new passion for the teen.

"I'm not 100% sure about my lifetime career," he said, "but I could definitely see this as a job I'd be interested in."

Contact Hannah Furfaro: hfurfaro@fresnobee.com, (559) 441-6412 or [@HannahFurfaro](#) on Twitter.