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Teacher makes tech both fun and relevant

Computers - Terrel Smith seeks to inspire the next generation of computer programmers

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SHERWOOD --Terrel Smith stood before a computer graphics class recently at Sherwood High School and urged the students to think about how many jobs in technology are filled each year by U.S. companies, and how many are filled by hires from Asia.

Each week his "Monday Motivation" talks are aimed at connecting what students learn in the classroom to what awaits them outside, said Nik Pittioni, a junior who has taken several technology classes from Smith.

"He makes learning real," Pittioni said.

The TechStart Education Foundation, founded by the Software Association of Oregon to provide technology-related opportunities to the state's students, has named Smith Oregon Technology Teacher of the Year for 2007.

Chris Brooks of Sherwood, who serves on the foundation's board of directors, has worked as a mentor to some of Smith's students and watched him in the classroom, to which he often invites technology professionals to share their experiences. Brooks said the foundation has leaned on Smith for many of its courses for other teachers.

Brooks admires how Smith keeps one step ahead of his students on technological developments and refashions what he's teaching when needed.

Smith heads the two-teacher computer science department. The program offers instruction in hardware and networking, software engineering, computer graphics and Web and Internet management.

Sure, all students need a background in the use of technology, but he's trying to front-load the pipeline of those who might pursue training and college for careers in the field.

To that end, he keeps looking for new ways to entice students, such as recrafting a beginning computer science class about 11/2 years ago to include game design.

"I couldn't get kids to stop playing computer games," he said, "so I tried tapping their intensity and channel it into computer science."

He said that's paid off as enrollment has grown from 50 students in 2005-06 school year to 80 in 2006-07. Pittioni was in the inaugural class, when the bugs were being worked out. Nevertheless, at a recent conference in Sunriver, he shared in a presentation how the class enabled him to finish half a textbook on the Visual Basic computer programming language in a few weeks that might otherwise have taken a full trimester.

Smith said he wants to do more to address gender disparities in the number of women who pursue technology education, training and careers.

In his classes, he tries to make technology work for him and his students. He tries weaning them from

depending on him by using Internet Management Training, with students completing hands-on exercises online.

"I want them to be independent learners," he said, "I want them to learn how to learn."

Pittioni said Smith recognizes differences among students, the strugglers and the whizzes, and supports them to pursue projects at their own pace. "He doesn't pressure them but they know he expects progress."

Many schools, Smith said, feel economic pressures in trying to get specialized technology instruction training for teachers -- who are often self-taught, because Oregon has no high school computer science teacher certification -- and equipment for the classes. Others find it hard to figure out effective curriculum.

Smith thinks technology education should be available to every student in the state. Working with teacher associations and in workshop presentations, he shares what he's learned about technology classes and after-school programs.

"That's kind of a mission for me -- to get it into more high schools."

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