Career & Education

Jamaicans replicating Google's Summer of Code

BY PENDA HONEYGHAN

Sunday, March 06, 2016

Members of the UWI Mona Computing Society and one of their facilitators watch intently as Palisadoes Project representative Peter Harrison (centre) peruses a section the Calico application form. From left are vice president Javon Davis, president Shane Richards, lecturer David Bain and first vice president Antonio Fearon.

As people across globe continue to strive to meet the demands of a technology-driven world, a group of Jamaicans living in the United States are determined to ensure that Jamaican students are not left behind.

This dedication manifested two Fridays ago with the launch of the Palisadoes Foundation's project, Calico — a replica of Google's Summer of Code designed to encourage post-secondary students across the world to earn money in exchange for writing software codes and learning open-source development. The programme launch was witnessed by at least 120 people gathered at the Faculty of Science and Technology's computing lecture room on the University of the West Indies (UWI), Mona campus.

"We decided to create a Jamaican technology taskforce, looking to provide a way to promote technology among Jamaicans, and that is to create a way through which Jamaica will have new strength in IT and software development outside situations where Jamaicans are simply consumers of software and not creators of software," Peter Harrison Palisadoes Foundation representative told the Jamaica Observer.

"Calico is the first of several projects. Students will be provided with a stipend in the summer for work done to improve existing software and applications. The programme is similar to one offered by Google; the standards will remain the same, the only differences will be that the programme will be part-time, and for Jamaican students," Harrison continued.

He explained that the programme, which should commence during the summer break, will see students earning US$500 each, on successful completion of all tasks assigned.

"Students will be awarded stipends based on how well they meet their goals. So they will be assigned projects that will require them to work on software bugs and features which are assigned. It is important to note that it is a learning process and so students will be mentored and guided during the course of the programme," Harrison explained.

The local development of the programme was made possible through a partnership with the UWI Mona Computing Society and the University of Technology, Jamaica's (UTech) Electronic Electrical Engineers (IEEE). The groups, which are both dedicated to promoting the importance of involvement in information technology , are the main recruiters of interested parties across all age groups to the programme.

"We were searching for a project that aligns with our vision and one that would make an impact on a cross section of students and not just members of the club, and when Peter and the Palisadoes Foundation approached us we were excited because, like them, we are eager to show others that a project like this can be successfully completed by students and it is not as dif   ficult as it appears to be," Shane Richards, president of the UWI, Mona Computing Society   , said.

His UTech colleague, chairman of IEEE, Jordan Jones told the Career & Education that, like Richards, he was in search of a similar programme that would inspire students to recognise their individual and collective abilities.

"When I was first introduced to Peter and he explained the aim of the programme I was sold right of f the bat. The programme has mentorships and workshops and it was right up UT ech's alley because at the time that was what we were working on. The expansion, however , has widened the horizon of what we can of fer to students," Jones said.

An important part of the launch was video seminars with winners of the Google Summit of Codes and members of the Google team who were able to shed light on applying for the summit, preparing projects of a very high calibre, and using information technology as a tool of advantage in the information technology age.

Harrison said he also hopes that student involvement in Calico will provide the confidence boost, mentorship and skills development necessary for students who will apply to be a part of the Google Summer of Codes — a competition that since it's introduction in 2005, has only had one Caribbean entrant.

Those wishing to participate in Calico should apply online between March 14 and 25 on palisades.org.