Can youths in 'hackathon' help struggling city help itself?

October 2 2015, byGeoff Mulvihill

In this Tuesday, Sept. 29, 2015 photograph, students study at Hopeworks 'N Camden, a nonprofit organization that teaches high school students and young adults how to build websites and use software, in Camden, N.J. The group in one of the nation's most impoverished places is planning its first hackathon to give teens and young adults in the city and professional programmers a chance to collaborate on solutions to local problems. The plan is to build new websites for some community groups and also to connect young Camden residents with area information technology professionals. (AP Photo/Mel Evans)

Can computer coding help turn this impoverished city around? One nonprofit group thinks so, and is bringing together youths and professional programmers for Camden's first "hackathon" this weekend.

Hopeworks 'N Camden, a youth development organization that among other things offers technology and training classes for teenagers and young adults, is holding the event this Saturday. They'll team up the students with professionals, some of them from Subaru, which plans to move its North American headquarters to the [city](#) of 77,000 across the Delaware River from Philadelphia.

Organizers say the benefit is twofold: Students can network and learn more about coding, and in the process work on projects that could benefit the city, a former industrial hub that with the loss of manufacturing became among the country's poorest and most dangerous.

"The reality is Camden can produce a lot of things," said Dan Rhoten, executive director of the nonprofit Hopeworks. "We're used to thinking of Camden as a helpless victim."

And showing young people that they don't have to "look like Mark Zuckerberg," the founder of Facebook—or have a college degree to build a career in technology—is also useful, he said.

Gabrielle Lee, 23, wants to get out of Camden but then return to teach English as a second language, and do other things to help. She sees online learning as a part of the efforts she'd like to make.

In this Tuesday, Sept. 29, 2015 photograph, student West Lalanne and others work at Hopeworks 'N Camden, a nonprofit organization that teaches high school students and young adults how to build websites and use software, in Camden, N.J. The group in one of the nation's most impoverished places is planning its first hackathon to give teens and young adults in the city and professional programmers a chance to collaborate on solutions to local problems. Lalanne, a Rutgers-Camden student who grew up largely in Massachusetts but now lives in Camden with his mother, said the hackathons can bring people together. (AP Photo/Mel Evans)

"Being at Hopeworks makes me want to impart my skills," she said.

In this first session, teams will work on designing new websites for four nonprofit organizations. Just one of them—the Mayor's Youth Council—is based in Camden.

But Rhoten said he plans to hold hackathons every six months or so. Part

of the idea is that Camden government agencies and nonprofits would know they're coming and be able to request projects. A session, for instance, could upgrade a city website intended to collect complaints from citizens on issues such as abandoned properties.

Camden is in the midst of ambitious transformation efforts. The state government has taken over the school district and is assigning charter school operators to run some existing public schools; the Camden County government has taken over policing the city and has a bigger force of officers than the city had; and the state is offering tax credits for businesses that move into the city.

Besides Subaru, other companies committed to coming include the Philadelphia 76ers, which are building a practice facility and offices; Holtec, which builds components for nuclear power plants; and American Water.
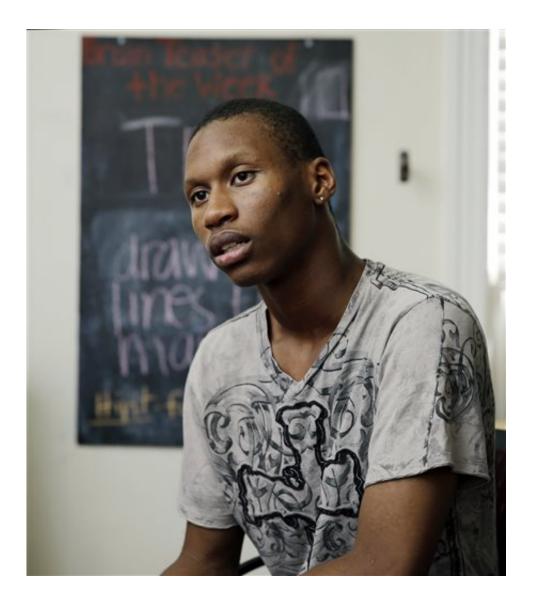
In this Tuesday, Sept. 29, 2015 photograph, student Michael Evans, left, and others work at Hopeworks 'N Camden, in Camden, N.J. The group in one of the nation's most impoverished places is planning its first hackathon to give teens and young adults in the city and professional programmers a chance to collaborate on solutions to local problems. (AP Photo/Mel Evans)

The tech students at Hopeworks see the arrival of big business as a good thing, though a development that may not help the city's residents directly or immediately.

The youths help Camden improve, too, Rhoten said, and show the city that it need not rely solely on outsiders.
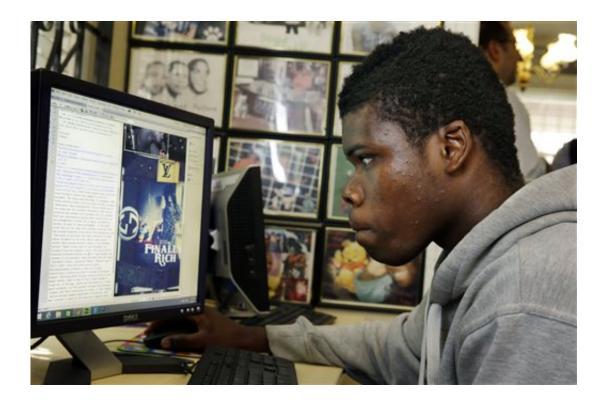
In this Tuesday, Sept. 29, 2015 photograph, student Michael Evans answers a question about his training at Hopeworks 'N Camden in Camden, N.J. The group in one of the nation's most impoverished places is planning its first hackathon to give teens and young adults in the city and professional programmers a chance to collaborate on solutions to local problems. (AP Photo/Mel Evans)

One of the Hopeworks trainees, West Lalanne, a 21-year-old Rutgers University-Camden student who grew up largely in Massachusetts but now lives in Camden with his mother, said the hackathons can bring people together.

"Right now Camden is a world where we have small communities," he said, "but we don't have a large community."

In this Tuesday, Sept. 29, 2015 photograph, student Greg Coleman works on a project at Hopeworks 'N Camden in Camden, N.J. The youth development organization that among other things offers technology and training classes for teenagers and young adults, is holding an event this Saturday. (AP Photo/Mel Evans)

In this Tuesday, Sept. 29, 2015 photograph, student Bri Tucker listens to a question about her training at Hopeworks 'N Camden, in Camden, N.J. The group in one of the nation's most impoverished places is planning its first hackathon to give teens and young adults in the city and professional programmers a chance to collaborate on solutions to local problems. The plan is to build new websites for some community groups and also to connect young Camden residents with area information technology professionals. (AP Photo/Mel Evans)

In this Tuesday, Sept. 29, 2015 photograph, as fellow student Gabrielle Lee, right, looks on, Camilo Reyes, answers a question about training at Hopeworks 'N Camden in Camden, N.J. Reyes wants to become a police officer. But after spending the last few months learning to build websites, he's thinking that might be a fallback job, or a way to make some money on the side. That's a big change, he said. "I was terrible with technology," Reyes said, "If you asked me to print something out, I'd have a panic attack." (AP Photo/Mel Evans)

In this Tuesday, Sept. 29, 2015 photograph, student Gabrielle Lee talks about her training at Hopeworks 'N Camden, in Camden, N.J. Lee says she wants to get out of Camden but then return to teach English to residents who don't know the language and do other things to help. She sees online learning as a part of the efforts she'd like to make. (AP Photo/Mel Evans)

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