

## Westbury technology nonprofit focused on STEM wins \$100K state grant

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Luis E. Tolosa credits an educational nonprofit in his hometown of Westbury, N.Y., with giving him the skills necessary to become a video game developer.

Tolosa, 24, said he began studying [game development](#) intently after being asked to teach at We Connect The Dots Inc., a nonprofit that introduces tech careers to middle and high [school](#) students.

We Connect The Dots recently won a \$100,000 grant from Empire State Development, the state's primary business-aid agency, for a proposed tech education center in Nassau County. The \$2.2 million project also has received a total of \$1.6 million from two technology businesses.

The center, expected to open in September in at least 10,000 square feet of space at 1025 Old Country Rd. in Westbury, will allow We Connect The Dots to expand beyond the 1,000 children it helps annually to work with teachers, job seekers and workers who want to learn new skills.

"They put me in charge of teaching a session on game development, and that led to a deeper understanding of the software," Tolosa said. "I began teaching full courses, and that learning helped me build a skill set which eventually landed me internships ... and now I'm working in game development. It kind of worked out," he said, referring to his relationship with the nonprofit, where he still teaches occasionally.

We Connect The Dots offers [young people](#) many opportunities to learn,

including a recent Code-A-Thon, which took place during 48 hours on a weekend; Discovery Day field trips to Manhattan tech centers; and a two-week summer camp called CreatingSTEAM, which offers instruction in science, technology, engineering, the arts and math.

"I keep hearing from employers that they can't find skilled workers, that schools aren't teaching skills to kids that eventually will get them into the workforce," said Laurie Carey, the nonprofit's CEO. "...I want to disrupt the education community in a positive way."

She started We Connect The Dots in 2013 in the dining room of her Cold Spring Harbor home. It was an outgrowth of her work at software giant Microsoft, where she helped young women and girls pursue tech careers, and a project she developed at Harvard Business School.

"We've got to get kids from all backgrounds learning about technology," Carey said recently. "I want to fix the digital divide."

We Connect The Dots' events are free or low-cost, thanks to partnerships with tech companies and funds Carey receives for her consulting work. An April 5 fundraiser is planned for the education center.

She said the nonprofit will be able to train teachers and offer more parent-child events once the center opens. It will add nine people to its payroll of three during the next three years, according to state records.

"We're helping to create this workforce for the future" by introducing young people to coding, development of apps and games, cybersecurity and advanced robotics, Carey said. "The state grant is important because it's credibility for us."

In addition to We Connect The Dots, the state is supporting the Sunrise Association summer camp in Wyandanch with a \$150,000 grant toward

construction of a building where kids with cancer will be taught STEAM skills. Both grants were recommended by the Long Island Regional Economic Development Council in last year's funding competition among 10 councils across the state.

Since the councils were created by Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo in 2011, the local council has endorsed nine STEAM and STEM projects for middle school and high school students that have received \$3.2 million in funding.

"The growth in jobs requiring STEM- and STEAM-related skills has increased exponentially in the last decade," said Stuart Rabinowitz, co-vice chairman of the Long Island council and Hofstra University's president.

Tolosa has one of those jobs at Framestore in Manhattan. He is working on virtual reality projects for the visual effects company.

"I didn't get a ton of exposure in high school to the different tech fields beyond being on the robotics team," recalled Tolosa, who graduated from Westbury High School in 2012 and Columbia University's engineering school in 2016.

"There's a lot of pressure on kids to figure out what they might do when they grow up," he said. "Getting exposure to the many types of jobs that are out there helps you see what you like, what your passion is. ... At We Connect The Dots, kids can learn a little bit about everything."

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## WE CONNECT THE DOTS AT A GLANCE

What it does: Introduces middle school and [high school students](#) to

technology careers, trains teachers and workers to use new technology

Headquarters: Westbury, N.Y.

Enrollment: About 1,000 children per year

Founder/CEO: Laurie Carey

Employees: 3: 12 within three years

Expansion plan: Renovate and equip 10,000 square feet for a research and education center, costing \$2.2 million

SOURCES: We Connect The Dots Inc., Empire State Development, Long Island Regional Economic Development Council

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