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Joining Dadeland store, Microsoft in Aventura offers free programming classes for kids

BY REBECA PICCARDO

06/16/2014 3:18 PM | Updated: 06/16/2014 6:04 PM



On the scavenger hunt around the store, teammates Jennifer Fonseca, 8, and Logan Garcia, 8, follow the clues on their handbooks and play with the different tablets and other gadgets at the store. SOUTH FLORIDA NEWS SERVICE

Michael Fonseca, 11, taught himself gaming and coding from tutorial websites like Code Academy. But learning online was just not enough.

“There’s a lot of stuff I really want to know,” he said.

When Amy, Michael’s mother, came across the technology-based curriculum offered at Microsoft’s summer camps, she immediately enrolled him.

“My son is a techie,” said Amy Fonseca. “I did some research online, and I saw some stuff about it, came in [to the Dadeland Mall store] and spoke to the manager.”

Along with Dadeland, which launched the Microsoft’s YouthSpark Summer Camp last year, the new Microsoft store at Aventura Mall also will offer free week-long programs for children interested in technology and multimedia.

Children interested in the Aventura summer camp, which will start on June 23, can enroll online at the Microsoft website.

Store manager Gustavo Gonzalez said a total of 250 children have reserved a space this summer for Microsoft’s community outreach initiative since the Aventura store opened on May 29.

“We’re really excited to have them,” said Gonzalez. “Those kids are part of what we’re here for in our community. They become part of what the store does on a daily basis.”

Campers can enroll in one, two or all three weekly programs, which feature coding, movie-making and photo-taking.

The programs do not run simultaneously.

At the Aventura store, every Monday, a new group of 12 campers will start one of the programs and graduate with a certificate in the course they chose to take by that Thursday. The Dadeland store, which holds classes of 14 campers, has filled its 400 slots through Aug. 14, but both stores actively enroll more families on the waiting lists when space opens up.

The curriculum is split into two age groups—the “junior designers” class for 8- to 10-year-olds is from 10 a.m. to noon; and the advanced designers class for 11 to 13-year-olds runs from 1 to 3 p.m.

With camp in session at the Dadeland Mall store on Monday morning, junior designers like Jennifer Fonseca, Michael’s sister, and her teammate Logan Garcia, roam the place starting at 10 a.m., touching and grabbing all the gadgets around as they complete a scavenger hunt.

“I loved [the scavenger hunt],” said Jennifer, 8. “My favorite part of the store is the huge computers.”

To one side of the store, Michael sat at one of the large monitors, playing online as he waited for his camp time to begin.

"I really want to learn how to make good videos in movie-making camp, so I can put them on YouTube," said Michael. "But I'm excited about [all the programs]."

Fonseca decided to sign up her daughter Jennifer as well, to get her interested in the field and so she can learn different skills at camp.

Fonseca said she liked the idea of the camp so much that she also told her friend, Tina Rollins, to enroll her 8-year-old son, Logan.

"I thought it would be interesting for my son to learn the back-end of game coding for the games he enjoys playing," Rollins said. "That's hard to find."

Brittany Valdes, community development specialist at the Dadeland store, said parents hang around the store as a requirement for the camp, drinking water or coffee, and learn from associates about new software and free virus checks.

"Taking care of the parents is as meaningful as taking care of the kids," said store manager Gonzalo Di Paolo.

At the end of summer, the Dadeland Mall camp transitions into an after-school program. With the same weekly curriculum as the camp, the after-school program runs through fall from 4 to 6 p.m.

Depending on the enrollment and success of Aventura's first summer camp, Aisha Malik, community development specialist at the Aventura store, said they are considering running a free after-school program as well.

"I know that Dadeland Mall did very well this past year with their after-school program," Malik said. "Having the program depends on the demand for it [in Aventura Mall]."