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Hamilton women in tech bridge gender gap by mentoring

Posted by [Lisa Bifano](#) on April 7, 2014 at 10:01 am

Women in technology may be an anomaly but a group of Hamilton women are trying to change that through mentorship.

One of them is Monika Bialy, a masters student in Software Engineering She knows that numbers and symbols in a text editor can go a long way to creating a beautiful website.

Bialy was first introduced to coding in high school. With a mentor in the industry, she quickly realized that computer science allowed her to combine her love of math and science. That is why she pays it forward by volunteering as a mentor for Ladies Learning Code (LLC) workshops.

LLC is a Toronto-based nonprofit aimed to empower everyone, especially women and girls, in their technical skills. It does so through workshops on a variety of computer-related topics such as Javascript, developing WordPress websites, PhotoShop or web design. Workshops are small in size, with a 4:1 student to mentor ratio.

Bialy believes that LLC is a great way to use her skills to give back and help young people feel more comfortable with coding.

There is also a certain geek factor associated with coding, she adds. While this can be isolating at times, Bialy believes that the mentors of LLC play a big role in shedding a positive light on the industry.

The LLC mentors help to facilitate the class by ensuring each student receives the guidance and support they need to succeed.

“The intimate nature of the classes makes everyone feel so comfortable with learning to code as everyone is in it together,” said Jaqueline Figueroa, a computer programming student. While it is normal to feel intimidated at first, Figueroa says that the classes are designed to make each student feel that they are being taken care of by the mentors.

Encouraging more female coders

Hamilton Chapter Lead, Erin O’Neil, of the McMaster Alumni Association led the way to bring LLC workshops to Hamilton. A regular at the Toronto LLC workshops, O’Neil saw the need — and the desire — to encourage more diverse participation in coding and tech.

“I think it’s important for everyone to learn how to code, not only women, but it’s clear that there is a gender gap in tech,” said O’Neil.

Reflecting on her experiences with LLC thus far, O’Neil states, “It’s neat to see the students bond over learning something new.”

“My favourite part is watching students have the “aha” moment, where they see code turn into a beautiful site.” O’Neil herself did not have any previous coding experience, but after attending LLC events she became more confident in her skill and makes a conscience effort to encourage other women to attend the workshops.



First Ladies Learning Code workshop in Hamilton in 2013 was sold-out (Photo supplied by Erin O'Neil)

The success of LLC nation-wide is a good indicator of the changing landscape in software development. Over the past two years, LLC has grown to over 20 chapters nationally, said O'Neil. The organization has gained traction since its launch in 2011, inspired by founder, [Heather Payne](#), who had initially tweeted out the idea of creating a group for women to learn coding.

Advice from mentors in the field

Originally working in publishing, Bianca DiPietro saw the need to gain more technical skills.

"With industry changing so much I knew I wanted to start something new," she said. Now a web designer, DiPietro credits her skill to LLC. She is thrilled to be involved in software events in Hamilton and forge meaningful connections with her peers.

"Nowadays so many communications jobs have a digital component. Knowing code sets you apart," adds Deb Hazlewood, who ran her own web development business in Hamilton for 12 years. She also found it increasingly difficult to find female contractors.

Her advice for women in the industry: Not to worry about your gender, age or skill set but to do your best and be the best designer you can.

"Hamilton is fortunate to have these types of initiative groups," says Meg Smith, a web designer. It is important to make people aware of software events and to especially be an advocate for women in their learning, says Smith.

Everyone will benefit from a more equal coding community, she adds. Meg further encourages women to challenge any barriers and focus on the end goal.



Held at Staircase Theatre, Ladies Learning Code workshops continues to attract women (and men) interested in coding (Photo supplied by Erin O'Neil)

Janine Jeffers, a virtual assistant, encourages women to be assertive and don't shy away from opportunities. Women need to consistently stand up for themselves and make their talents noticeable, she says.

For Amanda Tkaczyk, who works as an application support team lead, it is important for women to get out of their comfort zones and try something new. She hopes to see more women come out to LLC coding events with their friends to not only challenge the stereotype, but to enhance their skills and be role model for their counterparts.

Tkaczyk encourages women in the industry to keep being a mentor and ally for women wishing to learn.

"Make an effort to connect with other women and share their stories", she adds.

"It is not easy to find your place in any industry but notes that when you try new things, you will find your place."

Visit the [Ladies Learning Code \(LLC\) website](#) for more information on upcoming workshops and events. Connect with [Ladies Learning Code – Hamilton Chapter](#) on Facebook.



Author: [Lisa Bifano](#) Lisa was born and raised in Hamilton. A graduate of McMaster University, (Honours English & Communication Studies) Lisa now works for the Ontario Public Service. Her enthusiasm and passion continuously fuel her commitment and service to the betterment of the community.