

Computer programmers are wizards of the future

When Louis Erickson came to this country from Spain at the age of 5, he didn't speak English. He had a bad childhood followed by troubled teenage years. Then he dropped out of school when he was in the 11th grade.

By the time he was 19, Erickson says he decided he wanted to change. He had to let go of the anger he felt, because life isn't fair. "There's nothing you can do about it," Erickson said. "So you must make yourself better."

He got his GED and then went to college, where he received a degree in computer science.

Erickson delivered this message to a group of about two dozen students in an after school program at the Eleanor J. Johnson Youth Center in Fort Walton Beach.

Erickson, who is the Chief Operating Officer at Bit-Wizards, a computer software development company in Fort Walton Beach, visited the Youth Center to tell the students about his past and how he came to own a successful company. His goal was to tell them about computer programming in the hopes they might be interested in that field as a potential career.

"Computers are everywhere, and we need to know about them," Erickson said. "We do many things on computers every day, but we don't know how to read or write code. You don't have to be a genius; you just have to have an interest."

Erickson said there aren't enough people trained in computer skills today because schools don't teach students to write code. The ability to write code, gives you superpowers.

"You can get a great job with great pay and have the satisfaction of creating something," he said.

Erickson explained that there is no exact plan for success – no step 1, 2, 3 to follow. Everything you have in life comes because of the decisions you will make. "It's not what you do, it's who you are," he said. "If it's important to you, you'll find a way."

Erickson's message contained 10 points to get the students thinking about what it takes to be successful.

1. Play to your strengths. It takes reflection to know what you're good at.
2. Today matters. The decisions you make today will affect you later in life.
3. Persistence. Stick with whatever you're doing.
4. You never "arrive." Life is hard, but it makes you better. Strive to be better tomorrow than you were today.
5. Don't wait for perfect. You might wait too long.
6. Don't be afraid to fail. – Henry Ford said he failed his way to success. Take the good and forget about the bad. – Michael Jordan said "I failed over and over in my life and that is why I succeed".
7. Set goals. The difference between a dream and a goal is having a plan.
8. Be the miracle. Make your own luck.
9. Work your butt off. Make sacrifices.

10. Be exceptional. Success is measured in so many ways, so be exceptional.

Erickson said the young people need someone to show them the way, to encourage and guide them so they can be successful adults.

Despite his challenging family life, Erickson managed to make something of himself because he made the decision to change. “Nothing was ever handed to me. If I failed at my business today,” he said, “I’d start something else. That’s just who I am. I made the decision to succeed.”

The Eleanor J. Johnson Youth Center is one of 42 agencies that are a part of the United Way of Okaloosa and Walton Counties. The Center was founded in 1997 to provide after school programs in a safe environment for the youth of Fort Walton Beach public housing and the surrounding areas.

Approximately 200 young people, ages 6-15, visit the Center after school. Most come from working single-parent homes. The Center provides encouragement, guidance and support often missing in young peoples’ lives.

If you would like to make a difference in the lives of deserving young people, you can call Todd Gatlin, the Center’s Executive Director, at 850-244-5991, or contact the United Way at 243-0315.