

## ***Students Enter the Technology Age***

By Mohamed Hamaludin & Briana Barzola

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A New York City based program that seeks to bridge the Digital Divide graduated its first batch of students in Miami and has started classes for a second group. Per Scholas held commencement ceremonies for 14 men and women who completed its 15-week Technician Training Program, a training and job placement program that stretch across 450 hours. Friday, another 16 started training at the Per Scholas offices in downtown Miami.

But the program goes beyond training tomorrow's information technology technicians. Per Scholas also runs the ACCESS program as part of a commitment, program officials say, to make computers affordable and widen the pool of technology-savvy people.

ACCESS—a name intended to reflect the program's desire to make technology possible—started in 2000 in New York, collecting used computers from corporations and organizations.

Computers that cannot be salvaged are recycled but those that can still be used are refurbished and resold by Per Scholas and also through a nationwide relationship with Goodwill.

Per Scholas was formed by a consortium of foundations and corporations. Besides training more than 700 people in New York for careers as computer technicians, the organization has provided more than 40,000 families with low-cost computers since 1995. It has recycled about 300,000 computer systems and provided jobs for more than 500, Per Scholas officials said.

Funds from the computer re-selling operation helps pay for the training component.

Looking for another city that needed its program, Per Scholas conducted a feasibility study in Miami in summer 2002. Based on the findings, it hired Nadine Marcellus to open a satellite program this January.

Career Development Coordinator Gregory Preston said about 117 people expressed interest in joining the first class that started in March. Between 60 and 70 showed up for an admissions test of their reading, spelling, language and math skills and about 32 passed. Of those, 16 were selected for the training; 14 remained and graduated during commencement ceremonies held Aug. 4 at the Culmer Overtown Neighborhood Center.

“Although it was an intense course, it was an extraordinary experience,” Preston said. “Everyone bonded greatly with each other.”

Graduates shared Preston's view.

“Everyone there was incredibly supportive. Everyone loved it,” said Rosie Jenkins.

Mariana Gouveia felt more prepared for the job market. “I have more knowledge in repairing computers, and I feel like I'm finally ready,” Gouveia said.

Other graduates are Guy Bazin, Crystal Bryant, Jaqueline Dawton-Blash, Leonel Georges, Marie Flore Georges, Brian Mazyck, Ron Norman, Sandra Rodriguez, Torianno Rolle, Eli Slipko, Andy Sosa and Michael Spears.

Rolle had enrolled at Florida International University to study electrical engineering, but the cost was starting to be too much. A friend recommended Per Scholas and she switched to the IT training.

“It was a good class and I learned a lot,” Rolle said. “The program was great.”

Students for the first class are mostly from low-income homes and live in Empowerment Zone neighborhoods such as Liberty City and Overtown.

Augmenting the technical training, each student spent at least 90 hours on job-readiness training and career counseling. The curriculum included resume writing, interviewing, workplace survival and business communication skills.

The training prepares the students to enter the workforce as information technology technicians and includes technical study and A+ certification preparation. Per Scholas anticipates 80 percent of them will pass the A+ certification test, qualifying them for IT jobs.

“It was an amazing experience watching them go through the selection process and now graduating; it’s the most rewarding part of my job,” Marcellus said.

In selecting students, Per Scholas looked for candidates who have a strong desire to work in the technology industry and have basic computer skills such as knowing how to use a keyboard and mouse and who would attend classes regularly.

Applicants had to be at least 18 years of age and have a high school diploma or GED or English, reading and math skills equivalent to at least the 10th grade, a valid driver’s license or permit, Social Security card, birth certificate and federal work permit or green card, if applicable.

The program recruits students through a variety of sources. Some come on their own and others are referred to by partners of the program. For the first class, partner programs included the city of Miami housing agency, the North Side One Stop Center, the Joseph Caleb Center One Stop Center, the Miami-Dade Library System and Antioch Missionary Baptist Church.

Per Scholas officials say they will welcome more partners.

With the second class in session, Per Scholas has a waiting list of 26 and expects that number to increase as word spreads about the training, which is offered free. The organization hopes to train 50 students in 2004 and another 75 in 2005.

Per Scholas, a nonprofit organization, receives funding from the Miami-Dade Empowerment Trust that provides \$6,500 per student to cover the cost of training and class materials.

Funds also come from nonprofits, churches and the general public through ACCESS, which preceded the training group in Miami. The group also recycles computers but that third leg of its technology thrust has not started as yet locally.

Per Scholas would like more people to buy the computers and also get more sponsors.

“My hope is that more businesses and organizations and others that are interested in hiring IT technicians will look on Per Scholas as a viable resource that can provide potential employees who are fully trained to enter the technology workforce,” Marcellus said.