

PALOS VERDES **PENINSULA NEWS**

Programmed for Success

High school intern broadens her horizons
by learning web programming and design.

By Michelle Fisher

A lot can happen in a year. Just ask Alisa Mueller, 16, who in the past 18 months has gained invaluable web interface development and design skills through an internship program at Palos Verdes on the Net. Alisa admits she knew next to nothing about computers when she first walked through the doors of the center.

"I started coming last year just to find something to do over the summer, and it really stuck," says the Peninsula High junior. "When I first came here, I was like, 'What's a database?'" Alisa recalls. "I never really understood how web pages worked. I never knew there was a hidden language."

First, she taught herself the program in Coldfusion, which works with HTML, and became familiar with both. Next she moved onto JavaScript, which she describes as a "more complex language." She used the video- and CD-based training and online reference materials available at the center.

"By learning this programming language (Coldfusion) first, it has been easier to learn others. It's a lot of fun," Alisa says. "I like to see how things work and why they happen. I like exploring."

So far Alisa has assisted with creating an intern database and designing the voting web site used by the Palos Verdes Peninsula Land Conservancy Photo Contest.



While working in groups has taught her about teamwork, she says, working on her own has given her more initiative.

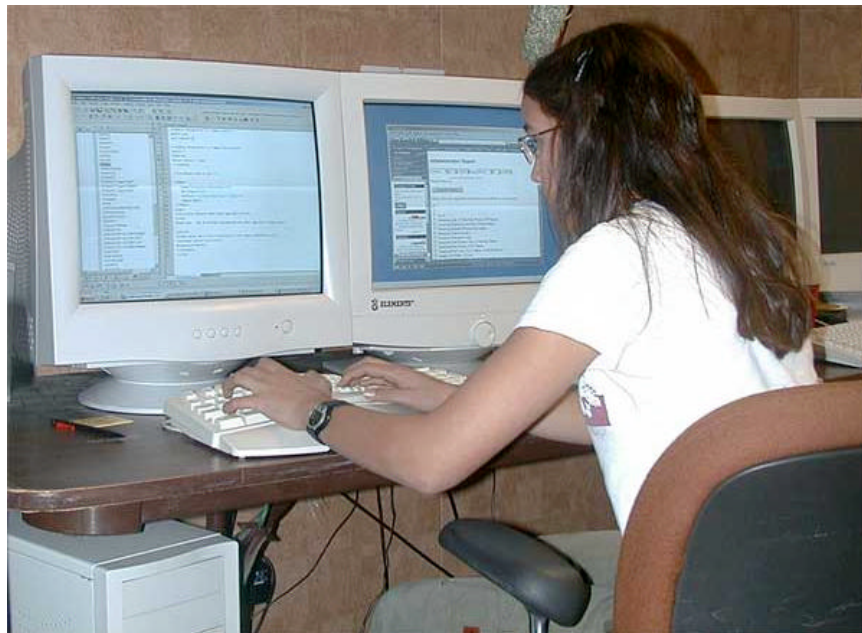
"At PVNET, you learn by doing. You look through your resources, find what you can and ask for help from people with more experience," she says, her dark eyes glinting with pride. "I think it's really helped me to have that kind of independence. I can work at my own speed, and I learn faster and remember things better when I have to figure them out."

This summer, Alisa has spent the bulk of her time focusing on an e-mail program that connects users to the Community Calendar featured on the palosverdes.com web site. Users can register for a free account and gain access to such services as e-mail notification and a personalized calendar. The latter feature allows users to select from nearly 600 organizations and create a calendar of events based on their specific interests-from sports and performing arts to politics and pets.

PVNET Director Ted Vegvari says having the internship program is especially rewarding when he sees youngsters like Alisa flourish. Every summer about 50 interns sign up for the program, with about half that number remaining through the school year. Several interns, including Alisa, receive stipends thanks to funding donated by Vegvari.

"I don't think kids this smart who have a strong interest in technology should spend their summer working in fast food," Vegvari says. "The purpose of the PVNET Internship program is to provide educational opportunities for interested kids."

Like a proud father, Vegvari boasts about the project Alisa is managing. He explains that the calendar is linked to web sites that the center has built for 14 local cities, including Rancho Palos Verdes and Rolling Hills Estates. As project manager of the complex Calendar Management System, Alisa is in charge of integrating it into other programs such as the e-mail and listserv systems.



"The vehicle Alisa is working on reflects the level of complexity and commitment shown by the most dedicated interns. It's a very, very difficult project," he continues. "She's excelling at it, meeting all the challenges and learning different aspects of programming for the web."

Another project Alisa helped to develop is a voting site where community members can vote on issues. She says she is proud of this project as well as the calendar. "You feel like you're actually making a difference, not just making a web page to make one, but to help the community," adds Alisa.

Next Alisa plans to learn Adobe Photoshop so that she can create her own web site with graphics. "Even though I enjoy programming the most, I realize web pages don't look as good without graphics on them," she says. "It's important that I broaden my horizons [and] learn other programs."

She says both of her parents are pleased about her new interest in computers. Her father, Craig Mueller, remembers the fun Alisa had building a computer during this summer's internship. "She knows more about hardware now. It used to be that Dad knew all about computers-now she can teach me a thing or two," he says. "She's pretty adept at programming."

Beyond the computer skills, Mueller says he has noticed a change in his daughter the past year. "She's gained a more self-confidence when she approaches a problem. It's given her pride that she can look into something and figure it out," Mueller says.

Mentoring and peer support is the basis for learning at PVNET. Dan Logan, a college-level programming intern, helps younger interns like Alisa with programming and dynamic content development.

Alisa credits the supportive learning environment at PVNET for her success, and encourages other teenagers to get involved. "Just plunge right in! If you have the motivation, it's definitely possible for you to learn to do anything," she says.

For more information about PVNET internships and other services offered by the center, call 541-7992 or visit www.palosverdes.com.

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