



Volunteer instructors Andrew Wirawan Sutjipto (far left) and Teng Hao teaching the Python programming language during a Code in the Community class by Saturday Kids. PHOTO: SATURDAY KIDS

Do good with tech

Volunteers put their skills to good use by creating websites for non-profit groups and teaching coding and programming



Toh Wen Li

Software engineer Tengku Hafidz remembers the first time he fell in love with coding – during a class in polytechnic.

“They taught us HTML and I saw that everything I typed on the computer – even just a ‘hello’ – appeared in the browser,” says the 27-year-old, referring to the basic language of the Web. “I thought, I’m actually creating a website already, using these lines of code I wrote myself.”

Mr Tengku, who went on to study information systems at university, now imparts tech skills to young people, particularly those from the Malay and Muslim communities. He started DevLabs Academy with his friends in 2015, which last year rolled out CodeHero, a free year-long programme of fortnightly Web development classes for secondary school students at madrasahs.

“We hope they can build something useful before they even graduate... or if they are exposed to (these skills), they might consider further education in that direction.”

He is also one of the creators of Makan Rescue, an app that alerts people to surplus food nearby, as well as Terawhere, a carpooling platform to help people get to mosques during the Ramadan period.

As digital skills grow increasingly important in today’s workforce, people like Mr Tengku who know a thing or two about coding, programming or data analytics are using their skills to give others a leg up.

While some create websites for non-profit organisations, others run courses for groups such as children from disadvantaged families, and women, who are under-represented in the tech industry.

There are at least 10 such groups which are doing this in Singapore.

Ms Rachel Chin, 42, quit her job as a project manager this year to become a stay-at-home mum and picked up coding because she wanted to her children, aged nine

Tech for the community

CODE IN THE COMMUNITY
What: Children from disadvantaged families learn to code for free in this Google-supported programme.
Info: codeinthecommunity.com

DEVLABS ACADEMY
What: Organises CodeHero – where secondary students in madrasahs learn about Web development – as well as courses and bootcamps.
Info: echoedlabs.com

THE CODETTE PROJECT
What: Provides Muslim and other minority women with awareness of and access to tech, through workshops, hackathons and other events.
Info: thecodetteproject.com

TECHLADIES
What: Programmes range from intensive bootcamps to talks and study groups. They also create apps and websites for non-profit organisations.
Info: www.techladies.co

SHE LOVES DATA
What: Helps women become more

data-literate through workshops and opportunities for soft skills development.
Info: shelovesdata.com

CODINGGIRLS
What: Runs events such as free coding workshops for women and bootcamps in fields like Web development and data analytics.
Info: codinggirls.sg

2IC GIRLS
What: Free coding, artificial intelligence and robotics classes for girls in Asia.
Info: www.2icgirls.com

CODETOLOVE
What: Helps non-profits revamp their websites. Also plans to provide general IT help.
Info: codetolove.org

CODE FOR SINGAPORE
What: A burgeoning community of coders, product designers and others who want to use their skills to do good. Will also run talks and workshops.
Info: www.meetup.com/Code-for-Singapore

and 11, to be more interested in it.

She ended up catching the coding bug and now volunteers with Code in the Community, an initiative by coding school Saturday Kids, where children from disadvantaged families attend lessons for free. She teaches the programming languages Scratch and Python.

Over at social enterprise She Loves Data, volunteer instructor Sateja Kauri, 29, wants to help more women get into technology – by teaching them skills and dispensing industry-related advice. She teaches the R programming language.

“Sometimes, they don’t even know what skills they have to pick up. And even though they might be in the data industry, they might not know about the range of professions it can offer. You don’t need to be a programmer to get into the data industry – you could have a psychology degree too,” says Ms Sateja, who works at a bank where she leads a team of data engineers.

At TechLadies, the aim is to also get more women into the tech industry. It organises both free and paid events such as mentorship sessions and bootcamps.

Founder Elisha Tan, 31, says: “Lives are changed by the work we do. There are air stewardesses and gymnastics teachers who have, with (our) help, become software engineers, tech influencers and product managers.”

Ms Tan, who works for a big US tech company, adds: “The community has given me a place where I can test my skills and apply them in my job.”

The group also helps create apps and websites for non-profit organisations.

Digital product designer Weiman Kow, 33, who is trained in user experience design, helps run “design studios” where non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and their users work with TechLadies’ developers and project managers to explore how they can use tech to tackle problems faced by the NGO.

TechLadies will, for example, often create an internal website to help the NGO collate, sort and find its data more efficiently – as opposed to typing into Excel spreadsheets.

“When you help an NGO,” Ms Kow says, “you are helping everybody they are servicing because with less administrative work, they can free up manpower to do other things.”

New group codeToLove has also been helping non-profit organisations improve their websites pro bono since April this year.

Founder Hendro Pick Kang, a 22-year-old student at Singapore Management University’s School of Information Systems, says: “We want to find out the problems these organisations are facing and address them with IT.”

It is worth the time and effort, say the volunteers. Mr Tengku, who had to forego overseas internships and courses, says: “I hope to stay focused on my mission to create a community of tech solution creators.”

tohwenn@sph.com.sg