Zakiya Harris of Hack the Hood
by Sarah Morgan

Hack the Hood's mission: Prepare young people of color for rewarding careers in tech.

For Zakiya Harris, growing up in East Oakland, Calif., meant navigating between two acutely different worlds every day. "I grew up in the hood, but I went to a very affluent school," she says. "So I spent my days being one of few black people, and I spent my nights being in a predominantly black neighborhood. I believe that really shapes the work that I do, because I've always been a bridge-builder."

Today, Harris is building bridges in the Bay Area as the co-founder of Hack the Hood, an Oakland-based nonprofit that introduces young people of color to careers in technology by training them to design and build free websites for small businesses. The participants, who range in age from 16 to 25, learn crucial skills for the 21st-century economy, and the local businesses establish an online presence that they otherwise might not have had the time, resources or know-how to build themselves. "Hack the Hood is able to level-up the skills of young people and also provide a huge economic development boost for small businesses in their community," Harris says.

Since 2014, Hack the Hood has sponsored 16 boot camps in eight cities across Northern California. The six-week programs have attracted a total of 234 young minorities from low-income neighborhoods, 92 percent of whom have completed the course. Boot camps begin with an intensive two-week focus on technical skills like website design, coding and social media promotion. "After that, the program transitions into an office," says Harris, when the young participants are paired with small-business clients and are responsible for self-managing their Web projects. "We want them to feel like freelancers and like a design firm," she says. The goal is to broaden their relationship to technology. "They start to see their place in tech," adds Harris. "They don't just have to be consumers, they can be creatives."

The local businesses that sign on also reap enormous benefits. Hack the Hood typically works with mom-and-pop shops whose owners aren't necessarily comfortable online or on social media. "A lot of these folks are small, and they don't want to be thinking about their website," Harris says. And because of the rapidly shifting demographics of Bay Area neighborhoods, businesses that lack an online presence aren't reaching the new residents moving in. "We want our local owners to be more visible," she says. "When people are Googling the new coffee shop or the closest tax preparer, we want those people who've been the backbone of our city to show up in the search results."

Hack the Hood participants don't just gain valuable experience working in tech, they also develop soft skills, like project management, public speaking, networking, perseverance and more. And besides learning to write CSS and HTML code, they're given a chance to explore the more creative aspects of maintaining a Web presence through site design, photography and videography. Realizing their true passions and talents helps them find their niche in technology, says Max Gibson, a lead instructor and creative strategist at Hack the Hood. "At first, they might not have an idea of what they want to do with their lives, or what their real strengths and skills are," Gibson says. "So for me, it's really about allowing them to discover what those things are, and then pointing them in the right direction."

For her part, Harris sees Hack the Hood as addressing a new kind of gulf between the technological haves and have-nots. "People typically think of the digital divide as those who have Internet access versus those who don't," she says. But that idea is quickly becoming outdated. "The issue now is the knowledge divide. Do you know how to pull up the hood and understand the code beneath it? Do you understand what your digital footprint is going to look like?"

Closing that knowledge gap has the potential to impact communities far beyond the Bay Area. "Young people of color are going to create platforms and opportunities in tech that no one else has," Harris says, pointing to the apps — such as those tackling police brutality, immigrant rights and other issues affecting communities of color — produced at recent hackathons attended by minorities. "My generation is passing on a planet that has many, many problems. Having a diversity of voices in the decision-making process is going to allow a diversity of solutions to come through." Technology provides important tools for solving today's problems, Harris says. "It's imperative that we make sure every young person has access to these tools so they can address the problems of our future."