

## Chipping away at tech

"I begged my parents to sign me up for these (computer science) classes. I think they went into debt to pay for it." &mdash; Albert Castillo, Codigo Systems | Photo: John R. Boehm

From this week's Focus Chipping away at tech By: Kevin Davis August 03, 2009

When he was in the fifth grade, Albert Castillo heard about a new extracurricular activity at his school: computer science.

"I begged my parents to sign me up for these classes," Mr. Castillo, 37, recalls. "I think they went into debt to pay for it."

His parents, both Mexican immigrants, had little money and little, if any, knowledge of computers. They came here in search of work, and both took factory jobs.

That fifth-grade class changed Mr. Castillo's life, leading him into a profession employing few Hispanics. Nationally, of the 3.1 million people employed in the computer or mathematical sciences in 2003, 5.5% were Hispanic. That percentage dipped slightly in 2008 to 5.1%.

The problem: a lack of mentors. Mr. Castillo says that as a student, he knew no Hispanic adults in the field. When he was accepted into the prestigious Massachusetts Institute of Technology, his parents did not grasp the significance.

"At first when I told them I wanted to go to MIT, they didn't know what it was," he says. "They were a little hesitant to see me go far away."

Mr. Castillo went on to earn a master's degree in engineering and computer science at Cornell University. After graduation, he got cold calls from companies trying to recruit him to work in Mexico and Latin America. But he wanted to stay here.

Mr. Castillo now has his own consultancy, Codigo System, specializing in software design. One of his main clients is Argonne National Laboratory, near Lemont.

He is committed to bringing more Hispanics into science, technology, engineering and mathematics. "We need to make sure we have more of us studying and working in these fields, becoming entrepreneurs, being leaders of high-tech businesses and encouraging others to do so," he says. "If not, we will continue to miss out."

David Olivencia, 37, a director of Oracle Corp.'s offices in Troy, Mich., is dismayed by the small number of Hispanics in his field: "It's a challenge to our country. When we look at the population growth among Hispanics, you would think that those in information technology would rise. Sadly, it's lagging."

Mr. Olivencia, who grew up in Chicago, believes Hispanics' dropout rate is one of the biggest barriers to their increased representation in professions of any kind. As president of the Detroit-based Hispanic IT Executive Council, he sees mentoring as key to reversing the trend.

He's working to get more Hispanics who are in technology fields, including colleagues at Oracle, to visit schools to tell their stories and tout IT as a career. "I think that will go a long way," he says.

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