

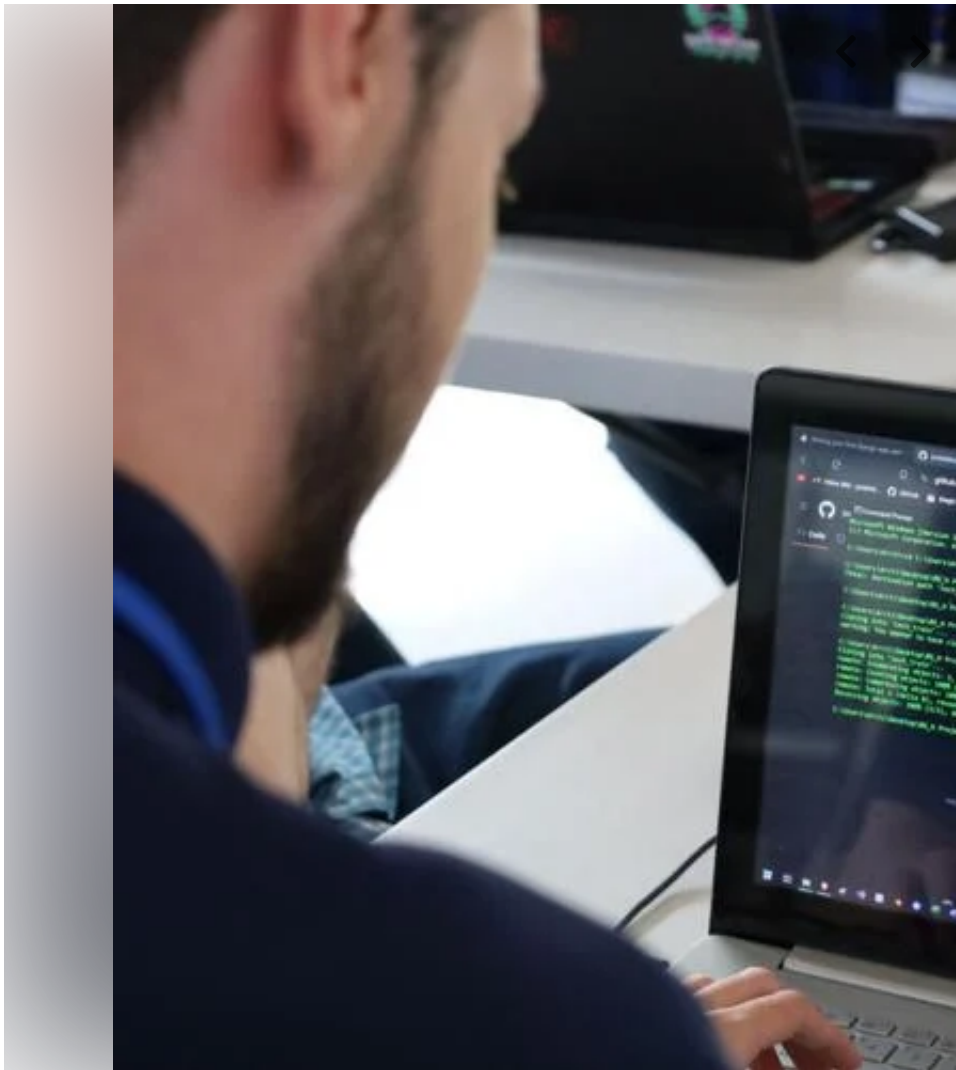
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Inaugural 'Hackathon' invites techies for development marathon

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Participants of the May 11 Imagine_BGKY Hackathon code away on their Western Kentucky University Innovation Campus.

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Despite its name, last weekend's "Hackathon" contestants weren't finding ways to break into your email.

The inaugural event from Imagine_BGKY at Western Kentucky University's Innovation Campus invited tech wizzes from across the region for an all-day marathon of development aimed at harnessing Bowling Green's full potential.

Over the course of 12 hours, six teams worked to craft deliverable projects from scratch using coding and design skills.

The winning team, comprised of members Starr May, Cassie Priddy, Daria Casey, Kelcee Gabbard and Devon Wilkening, created a website and demo app interface for a "Corvette Startup Accelerator" aimed at capitalizing on one of Bowling Green's best known brands to attract innovative businesses and designers.

May told the Daily News her team all knew one another previously from their time at WKU and looked forward to finding a local event like the Hackathon for the first time.

"I've heard about 'hackathons' in other places, and ... I was really surprised to see something so cool happening in my hometown," May said. "I felt like I couldn't not participate."

She said her team did not come in with a concrete idea but stayed flexible and soon settled on the Corvette Accelerator.

"We worked pretty much until the deadline, both for our product and for our presentation afterwards," she said. "It was a full day of tossing ideas around, and once we found something that we liked, (we said) 'OK, who here knows how to do this, and if we don't know, how quickly can we learn?' "

She and her team were thrilled to participate, she said, and they look forward to future events around Bowling Green.

"The Hackathon was an excellent exercise in learning how to work together as a team, learning how to work under pressure and learning how to balance knowing exactly what you want and knowing that you may have to change how you achieve that," May said.

Kahlil Garmon, Imagine_BGKY co-lead, was one of several organizers who got the event off the ground. Garmon attended similar events in the past and was surprised to see none hosted locally.

He was beyond satisfied with the turnout.

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"I know it was a good event because afterwards, two hours after closing it down, there's still a group of nerds outside in a circle talking about what they're going to do the next time and how it could have been better," Garmon said.

Garmon said the event was only a pilot and plans to host a bigger event later this year with more intentional outreach across the region. He said Bowling Green's central location means participants can range anywhere from Indiana to Tennessee.

The coming months, he said, will focus on bringing in university partners and corporate sponsors to help fund group participation, equipment and travel.

"We want it to be the biggest, greatest tech event in Kentucky," Garmon said.

Garmon, thankfully, has had some help. Teresa "Dr. T" Vasquez is co-founder of Nashville-based Repped in Tech, which offers resources and investment aimed at diversifying the "Tech Creators of Tomorrow."

Vazquez has attended and won numerous Hackathons throughout their career and helped mentor Garmon and participants throughout the process in Bowling Green. At Bowling Green's Hackathon, Vazquez was charged with getting teams "unstuck" as they worked through problems and helping them think outside the box to meet goals.

Vasquez said Hackathons are a chance to show young developers, especially those with underrepresented identities and backgrounds, that they have the skills needed to succeed in the tech industry.

"A lot of us feel like we can't contribute either because we don't see ourselves (represented) or we don't have enough experience or yada, yada, yada," Vasquez said.

"Hackathons help get rid of that fear that you have, because you have no time to be afraid, really."

Successful Hackathons teach participants the soft social skills needed in a team effort and help build communities that support all kinds of people with all kinds of skills, Vasquez said.

Vasquez said Bowling Green's Hackathon was a major success in that regard, adding that the judges would have had a hard time selecting the best project there.

"What that says to me is Bowling Green has access to a lot of talent who are willing to give back to the community," Vasquez said. "That is huge, and that's something that needs to be capitalized on."

Those interested in participating in future Hackathon events locally fill out a pre-registration form at cocreatic.com/imaginebgky-hackathon.

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