

# The New York Times

## Creating Unexpected Opportunities in a Recovering Economy

BY RACHEL L. SWARNS



*Jahmil Eady, 25, is a web developer and graduate of the Flatiron School. Nancy Borowick for The New York Times*

In New York City's burgeoning tech world, the start-ups and corporate behemoths are all hungry for talented coders and programmers. But Jahmil Eady never envisioned a career in technology. That was for math geeks, science nerds, white guys.

"I'm an African-American woman," Ms. Eady said, ticking off the reasons why not. "I love history and art and English. That wasn't me."

Then a friend invited her to a meet-up for computer programmers at the Flatiron School in Manhattan.

If I had bumped into Ms. Eady before she walked into that meet-up last summer, you would be reading a different column right now. You would be reading about how Ms.

Eady, a recent college graduate, was ensnared in the all-too-familiar underemployment trap. You would be learning about the short-term jobs that barely kept her afloat. You would be hearing about her uncertainty and anxiety about the future.

But that is no longer Ms. Eady's story.

Instead, this column is about new directions and unexpected opportunities, about how city officials, in partnership with innovative educators, are trying to transform the lives of ordinary people struggling to find their footing during this weak economic recovery.

It is also the story of how Ms. Eady, 25, finally found a stable, well-paying job.

At the Flatiron School, which trains people in software coding, Ms. Eady met female programmers and programmers of all shades. She met musicians who were coding, finance guys who were coding. She met creative people who talked about building things — new apps, new websites, new ways to tell stories.

Their work fired her imagination. It reminded her of her time as a production assistant for a documentary film company, when she helped stitch together bits of film and snippets of sound to create something beautiful.

"It just completely blew my mind," said Ms. Eady, who has a bachelor's degree in media studies with a concentration in film. "You don't have to have always been excited about math and science to be a programmer.

"You have to think outside the box," she said. "You have to be able to imagine the end product and, piece by piece, put it together. That's what I loved when I was doing film."

When she discovered that the city was offering fellowships for people interested in learning coding at Flatiron, she jumped at the chance.

So did about 1,200 other applicants. The program is run by the New York City Department of Small Business Services, which contracted with Flatiron to offer a free, 22-week course to New Yorkers who earned less than \$50,000 and had never worked as web developers. (The course normally costs \$12,000.) Twenty-eight people made the final cut, including Ms. Eady.

The program was designed to turn novices into web developers who could be placed in well-paying jobs in the tech industry, one of the fastest-growing sectors in the city. At a time when middle-class jobs are vanishing, the tech industry offers something quite rare: a surplus of well-paying jobs that do not always require college degrees.

“We targeted people with diverse backgrounds,” said Adam Enbar, the co-founder and chief executive of the Flatiron School. “The truth is that it’s a lot more creative than anything else, and anyone can learn.”

In an industry that is mostly white and mostly male, the fellows were strikingly diverse. Of the 28 people selected, 16 were women and 14 were minorities, city officials say. Nine were African-American. Eleven of the students were unemployed when they started the course in October. Four didn’t have college degrees.

“It was hard as hell,” Ms. Eady said.

During the five-and-a-half-month course, she learned Ruby on Rails and JavaScript, database building and web design. By the time they graduated in March, she and some of her classmates had helped the owner of a computer repair shop build a web application for his business.

Today, 21 of the 28 fellows — including Ms. Eady — have full-time technology jobs, with an average salary of \$70,000, city officials say. (Three fellows are currently weighing job offers and one is pursuing advanced education in coding.) Mayor Bill de Blasio plans to broaden the program into what he has named the New York City Tech Talent Pipeline, which aims to train more than 500 new workers over the next three years.

It won’t be easy. A sizable portion of the fellows in Ms. Eady’s program already had worked on digital projects or had taught themselves some programming skills.

But Ms. Eady, the artsy humanities graduate who had never worked with computers, is a testament to what is possible.

Last month, she started work as a junior applications developer at Fox News. For the first time in her life, she has a full-time job with health insurance and a 401(k).

“I’m using my brain,” she said. “I’m growing every day. And on top of that, I’m getting paid well to do all of this? That’s awesome.”