

NEWS

Taxes no kid's stuff

BY ERIC LINDBERG
DAILY SOUND STAFF WRITER

At first glance, Room 22 at Santa Barbara High School might look like a typical computer lab on a Thursday afternoon, with students clattering away on keyboards and cracking jokes.

But a closer look reveals a handful of adults scattered around the room, clutching W-2s and 1099s, the trademarks of a tax season in full swing.

And as the students pause occasionally to ask a question or pore over a form, it becomes apparent they are gradually filling in tax returns.

It's a free service known as VITA (Volunteer Income Tax Assistance), and hundreds of Santa Barbarans will take advantage of it by the time the April 15 filing deadline rolls around.

"Most tax preparers rip people off," says junior Katherine Gray, a student volunteer in her second year with the VITA program.

"They charge a ton of money for simple tax returns."

In contrast, the high school's program is a win-win situation.

Students log community service hours and get great business and accounting experience; local residents get their taxes done for free.

Launched 12 years ago by retired IRS agent Bob Correa and accounting teacher Lee Ann Knodel, the program handles about 600 to 800 returns every year, which translates into about \$50,000 in free tax services that are targeted at low-income and senior residents.

"I just like working with the community," Correa says. "I think it's a great community service."

Although the VITA program itself started in 1969 and has about 20,000 sites nationwide, Santa Barbara High School is the first high school in the country to be fully certified by the IRS to file tax returns from the classroom.

The setup is pretty simple.

In the fall, students get hooked into the program through Knodel's accounting course or word of mouth.

They pore over IRS material and attend weekly training sessions before completing a certification test.

When tax season hits, they interview taxpayers, input data into professional tax software, run a diagnostic to ensure the forms are filled out properly, then send off the returns directly to the IRS.

"Totally painless," says Moises Gonzalez, 20, one of a few taxpayers who trickled into Room 22 yesterday.

He is a former Don and VITA volunteer who now relies on the program to get his taxes in every year.

Although it depends on the complexity of each individual tax return, most volunteers can complete one in about half an hour. Senior Dee Dee Wei has been involved with the program since her freshman year and now serves as the student coordinator, essentially overseeing the entire operation.

She is pretty speedy.

"If it's just a few W-2s, I could probably do it in 10 minutes," she says, although she admits, "The first year, I was pretty confused."

Senior Katherine Gonzalez is in her first



DAILY SOUND / Janelle Holcombe

Student Dee Dee Wei helps Edward Cleveland prepare his taxes.

year as a student volunteer and said the program is proving to be a valuable experience.

"I want to be a successful businesswoman, so this is a great opportunity," she says. She plans to major in business next year and says helping her community is the most rewarding part of the program.

"Just seeing that they don't have to go out and pay all this money to get their taxes done is great."

Although they offer free tax assistance, Knodel says the plan isn't to steal business away from professional tax preparers.

"We're targeting the low-income [residents]," she says, giving the example of a single mother who can barely make her house payment and can't afford tax services. "We want to help her."

This is the second year the program has been held exclusively at the high school, Knodel says, explaining that the students used to set up shop at the Westside and Franklin community centers.

"We have more parking and we don't have to haul our computers around," she says.

"It was a really good move for us."

However, attendance dropped off last year after the initial move.

Knodel hopes word of the new location will spread and more local residents will take advantage of the free service.

Taxpayers who wish to participate should bring all W-2 and 1099 forms, a copy of their previous tax return, deduction and credit information, proof of account for direct deposit of their refund, Social Security or Individual Taxpayer Identification cards, and proof of identification.

More information is available by calling the VITA classroom at 963-8597.

GRANADA

The Opening Gala

Come celebrate
The Renaissance!

Sponsored by
Melchiori Construction
Company
The World
KDB 93.7 fm

*The wait
is over.*

5:30 P.M.

THE PATRON RECEPTION

Hors d'oeuvres by Philippe Sautot
Champagne & Cocktails

7:00 P.M.

THE GALA PERFORMANCE

Flamenco Arts • Opera Santa Barbara
Santa Barbara Choral Society • Santa Barbara
Symphony • State Street Ballet
Nina Bodnar • Warren Jones

9:00 P.M.

THE PATRON PARTY

Supper-Club Catering by Elements
Signature Cocktails & Wine
Dancing to Big Band Swing by West Coast Music
"The World" Raffle Drawing
8-Night Luxury Cruise for 4!

TICKETS

\$250 • \$500 • \$10,000 Table Sponsor
805.899.2222 or 1222 State Street

www.granadosb.org

for information

RENAISSANCE 2008

THURSDAY, MARCH 6