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The Man Who Gives Computers to Kids

'The Day I Got Mine Was Like Christmas'

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Phil Shapiro has computers in his bathroom. He has computers in the back seat of his Honda. He also has computer parts--disk drives and keyboards and monitors strewn under foot and hiding under boxes of crackers and crumpled balls of clothes around his one-bedroom Arlington apartment.

Shapiro is not a nouveau-riche techie but the instructional technology coordinator for Arlington County schools. From his apartment and his car, he is trying to bridge the digital divide, refurbishing old donated computers so they can be placed in the homes of low-income students.

"The day I got mine was like Christmas," said Mercedes Wilson, an 8-year-old at Arlington's Hoffman-Boston Elementary School who woke up Saturday to find a five-year-old Power Mac 6100 sitting in her home. "It was the best day, ever."

Mercedes is one of 12 children--all third-graders at Hoffman-Boston--participating in the pilot project. Shapiro hopes the experiment eventually will expand into a program in which computers five to 10 years old are routinely being put in the homes of students who cannot afford them.

Some of the machines he is distributing don't have Internet access or a CD-ROM drive. But Shapiro and other technology specialists say that having even the most basic computer in a home helps a child become computer-literate and develop skills such as keyboarding and problem-solving.

Arlington is one of the few area school districts that requires third-graders to learn how to type. Students without a computer at home have nervous faces and uneasy fingers when they approach one at school, Shapiro and Arlington classroom teachers have noticed. And both in keyboarding and other computer skills, they fall significantly behind peers who spend hours surfing, typing and playing on home computers.

"These kids just deserve a chance to get started," said Shapiro, as he stepped over the computer parts sprawled around his living room. "I could tell without even asking if a kid has a computer at home. It's like there is a race that started and everyone else is around the corner and you look at the other kids and they are already behind."

In this gilded age of 30-year-old Internet millionaires, schools often get donations of shiny new computers from economically booming companies. But older computers typically get thrown away, even though a child could use them to write, play math games and try out other educational software, Shapiro said.

In e-mails and phone calls, he has been urging companies, individuals and school districts to stop discarding older computers. He secured the machines for the 12 Hoffman-Boston students from the Virginia Macintosh Users Group, which got them from various donors.

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Most aging computers end up stored in a dusty basement or thrown in the dumpster, agreed Stephen Ronan, network manager for Community Technology Centers Network, a group of 350 nonprofit organizations that has set up computer centers in low-income neighborhoods.

"It's really startling," Ronan said. "They really are these amazing resources."

So far Shapiro has given computers to Mercedes and two of her classmates. Their teacher, Jennifer Denino, said she already is noticing how much more quickly they are learning to type.

About 69 percent of students at Hoffman-Boston receive free or reduced-price lunches, and some of them lack even the most basic supplies, Denino said. During a recent class, she listened as a student told her she could not complete an assignment at home because she does not have any glue.

"The really touching thing is that makes them even more appreciative of receiving this," Denino said of the computers. "They don't ask if it has the Internet or if it can play a movie." She is helping to install the donated computers and has brought along her husband, who speaks Spanish, to help communicate with Latino parents who don't speak English.

Standing in her class, Mercedes recalled how she started typing the minute she discovered her machine. Magaly Ramirez, 9, rushed over to join in the conversation. "I got mine also," she cooed about her five-year-old Power Mac 7200. "I am getting so fast typing."

Soon Melicia Granados, 9, skipped over. She praised her 10-year-old Apple 2C and said she spends hours typing and playing a math game on it each night.

The three girls all started laughing when they were asked what they were doing with their time before their computers arrived. They rattled off a list of television shows: "Pokemon," "Digemon," "Smart Guy." Then they shrugged their shoulders and ran off to go practice more typing, side by side with all the other students. This time, they all seemed to be keeping pace.

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