

The Chesapeake PC Users Group: A Resource For Families

By Laura Wiegmann

Today's Americans live in a technological society, and there is no getting away from that. If there is no access to technology, or internet, it becomes almost impossible to function in the world. Online, people can do a host of "life requirements"; re-registering vehicles, paying bills, searching and applying for jobs and so much more. In some cases, the person on the other end doesn't want to handle business any other way, leaving the computer-less person at a definite disadvantage. This phenomenon has come to be known as "the digital divide".

To help people cross that divide, in 1999 Jerry Moscovitz began The Chesapeake PC Users Group, with a mission to provide computers to people who can't afford to buy new ones. The group has forged an agreement with Microsoft to provide software and such for the computers, helping them to accomplish their mission. Then, too, the community donates desktop computers to be completely refurbished. (They do not, however, provide laptops because people generally use their laptops beyond reviving, and they are also much more time consuming to work on than a desktop computer.)

When these computers are received at the facility, the first concern is protecting the privacy of the donor. They take this seriously, so the hard drive is top priority. Every single computer that is distributed must have the hard drive overwritten seven different times, using an old but still very effective system, donated to them by the Department of Defense. Once this is complete, the computer is checked and cleaned for performance. Finally, there are several new programs installed for practical use, including a cleaner, 2 browsers, Microsoft Security Essentials (anti-malware), Adobe Reader, Photostory 3, Picasa 3, a Zip program, an MP3 converter, and QuickTime. The computer performance and hardware are all guaranteed for 90 days, where there has been no misuse. To complete the package, there is a program available through Comcast where families whose children receive free school lunches can qualify for Internet service priced at \$9.99 per month.

CHPCUG provides not only to individuals with need, they will also supply computers to other non-profit groups, often donating several computers to one organization. However, they will not promote political or religious



organizations, and the government is also excluded.

Since 1999, the group has donated over 2000 computers to individuals and other non profit groups. In June of 2005, they were excited to donate their 1000th computer to a student at the Mills Parole Elementary School, which has, through the years, become one of their proudest moments, because it was part of a much bigger story. Fran Damratowski, Special Interest Group Chairperson, learned about and was able to obtain a \$10,000 grant. They began looking for a great use for the grant, and were soon connected with the Mills Parole Elementary School, which had many needy families in it. The Chesapeake PC Users Group went into the school in force and presented their opportunity to those families that could benefit from it. When all was said and done, CHPCUG had given computers to over 400 families in the school.

The team working on these computers normally consists of about 12 people, but right now several of them are down due to health and family issues. Still, they get from 6 to 8 volunteers every time the doors are open. Fran says that they are all "techie retirees", and doing this "keeps them off the streets".



Computers are everywhere, and those who use them tend to take for granted all the services they provide. For instance, typing one sentence online gives all the resources necessary for any school assignment or research paper. Paying a bill or renewing a license online saves the gas and time required to go there. Ordering things online enables shoppers to get exactly what they need without going to 5 different stores. Seeking a job is almost impossible without going online because much of what is available is only online, and so is the beginning of the application process. It enables many people to work from home and make money when they are shut ins.

These are only a few of the ways computers have changed life for everyone. If there is no computer in the home, the family is handicapped. Chesapeake PC Users Group realizes this, they are doing all they can to eliminate it.

Applying for a computer is very simple. The facility is open on Wednesday and Thursday from 9:30 to 4:30, and interested parties can email Fran at refurbishing@chesapeakepcusersgroup.org or call 410-923-1550. There is an application to be filled out, and applicants must be able to demonstrate need. The group is non-profit, but since it is self supporting, they require an \$80 donation for each computer, a fraction of the value.

Donations are gladly accepted from anyone who has replaced their computer and doesn't know what to do with their older one. Donations are also gladly given to anyone who is financially and "technologically" handicapped, and wants to cross "the digital divide". The Chesapeake PC Users Group was formed to be the resource for meeting true technological need, and with community support, they continue to be able to do just that.