

PRESTIDIGITALIZATION: Volunteers Working Community Magic

What do India, Ecuador, Cameroon and New Orleans have in common? All have been visited by volunteer teams from CommuniTech, a Penn Engineering service organization that refurbishes donated computers and distributes them to schools and non-profit agencies.

Though CommuniTech is based in SEAS, it is open to “anyone in the University who wants to bridge the digital divide,” says Brian Quimby (E '08). Quimby joined CommuniTech in his freshman year, was elected president in his sophomore and junior years, and has served in a leadership role for the last two major projects: in Cameroon, for two and a half weeks over winter break, and in New Orleans for six days during spring break.

The Cameroon visit was funded in part by Google, Pro-Literacy, and the Cameroon-based Meta Quality of Life Improvement Foundation. “We were in a rush and put 125 computers in a shipping crate to lower costs and sent it on ahead,” he recalls. “From our experience, we expected that about 20% of them wouldn’t work. So we got 100 of the 125 working, with some of the remainder kept for parts and repairs.”

In Mbengwi, Cameroon, the students (see sidebar for names) joined Dr. Godlove Fonjweng (GSAS '97), Assistant Dean of Advising in the College, and Jenny Jinor (Graduate Student, SP2), who assists non-profit outreach agencies in Cameroon. Dr. Fonjweng is originally from Cameroon, and was instrumental in establishing this project. The project was co-led by Steve Hershman (EGr/C '08).

With local help, the team installed computers in labs at educational institutions ranging from a nursery school to a university, and at non-governmental organizations such as the Akwi Memorial Foundation, which will now provide computer-literacy training. Fonjweng is working to set up a consortium to ensure sustainability among the labs. “Sustainability is one of our goals,” notes Quimby. “There are not a lot of computer-repair people in Cameroon.”

The donated computers were mostly Pentium 2 and Pentium 3 machines, which in Cameroon can cost nearly \$320—more than many schools and non-profit agencies can afford.

WALKIN' IN NEW ORLEANS

The spring trip took a second team headed by Quimby to twenty businesses in New Orleans, ranging from a community bookstore to a hair salon to child-care centers. “Idea Village, a New Orleans non-profit that drives social change through entrepreneurship, brought us on board to aid entrepreneurship through technology development and training,” he explains. Google helped sponsor the group.

“In Cameroon, we focused on community technology centers because we wanted to give ordinary people access to using and learning about computers. In New Orleans, we focused on small-business development, after Hurricane Katrina—‘How can technology help your business get back to the place it was before or even a little further?’ It could be something like a website or e-commerce, or speeding up a checkout or inventory system.”

The New Orleans project was the brainchild of Joseph Sun, Director of Academic Affairs, who also oversees the school’s community technology/outreach initiatives. After reading about Idea Village’s work and Penn alumna Miji Park’s (C '06) involvement, Sun spoke with leaders in CommuniTech and Technology Entrepreneurship Club (TEC) about their possible interest in a combined project. With everyone’s enthusiastic commitment, Sun spoke with Sonya Gwak, SEAS’ Student Affairs and Advising Associate Director, who agreed to spearhead its implementation.

The CommuniTech and TEC teams worked closely together, fielding a group of 10 students. At most businesses, CommuniTech donated a computer and basic training, while TEC consulted on business technology. The teams also met for group dinners to plan the next day’s activities. The field work was overseen by Gwak and Megan Doherty, Service Initiatives Program Coordinator for SEAS.

TEC put together a guide to help entrepreneurs understand how to establish a web presence and create a website. CommuniTech installed 17 Pentium 4 computers and has shipped additional machines, thanks in part to donations from Computing and Educational Technology Services (CETS) at Penn Engineering and Wharton Computing.

“Our goal was to help each business use technology to recover, improve, and expand,” Quimby says. “At the Community Book Center, we installed a point-of-sale system and linked it with a database of all the books in inventory. At Voodoo Authentica, a small



The Cameroon CommuniTech Team: Brian Quimby (E '08), Steve Hershman (EGr/C '08) Dr. Godlove Fonjweng (College Assistant Dean for Advising; GSAS '97), John Awahmukalah (C '78), Jenny Jinor (Graduate SP2)

The New Orleans CommuniTech Team: Brian Quimby (E '08), Ernest Ted Gomez (M&T '08), Ju Tan (E '09), Simeon McMillan (W '08), Arjun Gopalratnam (E '10), Nick Eng (C '10), Sonya Gwak (Advisor), Megan Doherty (Advisor)

TEC: Dan Tomaschko (E '07), Richard Stevenson (E '07), Ryan Rayfield (E '08), Vishnu Sivakumar (EGr '08)



shop in the French Quarter, we set up a computer-fax system for taking orders online. Some of the other businesses just needed basic computer training, or help with specific programs.”

The team also installed computers loaded with educational games at child-care centers. One center had had five computers pre-Katrina, each stuffed with educational software. Quimby hopes that the single computer the team installed will act as a seed for rejuvenation.

A RETURN FROM DEVASTATION

Quimby saw New Orleans as “definitely a city in transition. One street looks completely normal, and the next has boarded up shops and houses. It’s one thing to see pictures on TV, but entirely another to walk through the city streets.”

In February, *The Philadelphia Inquirer* noted that “hundreds of [New Orleans’] best and brightest have made the wrenching decision to leave at a time when the population is supposed to be rebounding.” The emigrants cite a high crime rate, high rents, and a lack of leadership, among other problems. “While many poorer residents have moved back, the ‘brain drain’ of professionals that the city was experiencing before the storm appears to have accelerated,” the *Inquirer* article added.

Yet Quimby found that “most of the people we met were really hopeful for the future. The fact that the small business owners we assisted had returned to New Orleans was a testament itself to their dedication to bringing the city back. By the end of the trip, I absolutely saw why they loved their city so much.”

Future CommuniTech projects this year, says Quimby, will include several local installations and Web/software development efforts, and a possible summer installation stint in India and possibly Pakistan. There’s also a “slim chance” of a project on the Caribbean island of St. Lucia the following summer.

Both Cameroon and New Orleans provided the teams with an immediate and gratifying response, often expressed in invitations to dine: “In Cameroon, we had six different offers of whose house we could go to for dinner—‘Come over, we’ll feed you.’ And in New Orleans we had to turn down some dinner invitations because we had already accepted others.”

In other words, the volunteer work of organizations like CommuniTech and TEC can feed both the body and the spirit. ▾

