

## For young computer users, THE ULTIMATE UPGRADE,

New project aims to give hundreds of computers to low-income girls in Holyoke

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JULIE Pokela's idea sprang forth in one of those "there oughta be a way" moments.

It was followed by the letdown of being told it probably wouldn't work.

It was revived by finding an ally who said he'd help.

Now it's a fledgling project that has a name: Computers for Kids.

And it just might make a difference in the lives of some 300 low-income girls and young women in Holyoke.

Visit sparks an idea

The idea for the project can be traced back to a morning last December when Pokela, a Northampton businesswoman, drove down to Holyoke to visit The Care Center.

Housed in a rambling old brick home in a residential neighborhood on Cabot Street, the center is an education program for pregnant or parenting teenagers in Holyoke who have dropped out of school.

Every year, about 120 young women, nearly all of them low-income mothers on welfare, take classes in math, science, writing, literature, social studies and other subjects to prepare for high school equivalency exams.

Pokela, owner of Market Street Research, a marketing research firm, was one of about 10 business and community leaders who had been invited. The visit was part of an effort the center was making to spread the word about its work. In recent years, executive director Anne Teschner and her staff of 25 have tried to raise the students' level of academic achievement and to inspire in them the belief that a college education is not out of their reach.

"We came to understand that if we were really going to help these girls, if our goal is to make them self-sufficient, they need to go beyond a GED," Teschner said. In recent years, she said, nearly 80 percent of those who have passed their GED exam at the center have gone on to start classes at the community college level.

When Pokela and her group toured the site, they paused at a small room where about 10 computers are almost always in use. Several of the visitors mentioned they had extras in their offices that perhaps the girls could use.

"So I got this idea ... " Pokela said.

Across the divide

Pokela knew that the students at the center were on the disadvantaged side of what's called "the digital divide" - a term that refers to those who, because of such factors as poverty or geographic isolation, aren't online.

Many of the girls, Pokela learned, arrive at the center with little or none of the computer experience their affluent counterparts take for granted.

Once there, they're taught how to use computers to do the research and writing required for their homework assignments. But most of them, Pokela discovered, have no computers at home that would allow them the flexibility of being able to do some of their work on nights or weekends.

As a business owner, Pokela knew it's not unusual these days for computers to fall victim to technology upgrades that leave them sitting idle.



CHARLES ABEL

Julie Pokela, right, is the owner of Market Street Research in Northampton and the driving force behind Computers for Kids, a new project whose goal is to give old computers new lives by putting them in the hands of low-income girls and young women in Holyoke. Uplinc, a South Deerfield-based computer company, has agreed to refurbish the computers - at no cost. Pat Hassett, Uplinc's sales director, is at left.

Shouldn't it be possible, she wondered, to marry the need to the supply?

Pokela's query has now become a project called Computers for Kids. Its goal is to find about 300 computers that will be outfitted with new operating systems and software and, she hopes, with free Internet access.

The plan is for about 200 computers to be given to The Care Center. An additional 100 will go to Girls Inc., a Holyoke program that is part of a national youth organization which offers after-school programs, sports, mentoring opportunities and other activities for girls ages 6 to 18.

Girls Inc. is all about helping girls excel, according to director Virginia Dillon, and Computers for Kids can play a role in that. For example, Girls Inc. currently has only eight computers on site for the 40 or so teenagers who attend its programs, Dillon said, and none of those teens has a computer of her own.

"It will be great to get them in the hands of these kids at home," she said.

#### Getting off the ground

Pokela quickly realized that getting her idea to fly wasn't going to be easy. The agencies, first of all, needed fairly up-to-date equipment in working order - which meant Pokela had to find someone willing to take on the task of readying the computers for their new lives.

"It was one discouraging phone call after another," Pokela said. Refurbishing the computers would require time and expertise as well as a willingness to do it for no compensation - a combination Pokela found hard to come by.

In mid-February, at the suggestion of Suzanne Beck, head of the Greater Northampton Chamber of Commerce, Pokela called Uplinc, a computer company in South Deerfield.

Uplinc employees, it turned out, had talked among themselves about getting involved in a community-service project, but hadn't settled on anything specific.

Pat Hassett, the company's sales director, said Ron Marino, the company's founder and director, liked the Computers for Kids concept, as did many of the 27 employees.

"I could see how this would help prepare [the girls] more thoroughly for either the workplace or college," Hassett said. "So we were thrilled to be a part of it."

Hassett explained that Uplinc employees "will completely wipe the hard drives clean of everything that's on them: data, applications, operating system, etc."

That way, he said, donors will not have to worry about sensitive data being accessed by a new owner.

"The hard drives will be blank when we complete the process," Hassett said, "and nothing will be able to be recovered from them." That pledge will be certified to the donor in writing, he added.

"Once we're done preparing the hard drives," Hassett said, "we'll install an operating system and the agreed-upon applications. Any other upgrades that need to be done to meet the minimum system requirements for the operating system or applications, such as additional memory, will also need to be done during this process."

Hassett estimates the work on each computer will take about 60 to 90 minutes - time he and others will fit around their regular responsibilities.

The final piece of the project will be a course in computer information systems at Holyoke Community College. Taught by HCC instructor Casey Storozuk, its purpose will be to give the computers' new owners a solid knowledge of their mechanics and uses.

#### Outreach

To find potential computer donors, Hassett and Pokela will be contacting various western Massachusetts businesses.

Their first donation, a laptop, came from Eva Thomson of Thomson Financial Management in Northampton.

Thomson said she had planned to find someplace to donate her 3-year-old laptop when she replaced it with a new system. But taking it to a place that would remove everything from the hard drive was a chore she never got around to. "It always got knocked down to the bottom" of the to-do list, she said.

When Pokela, a longtime acquaintance, mentioned her new project, Thomson knew she'd found a solution. She had no qualms about entrusting the technical work to a company of Uplinc's reputation, she said - and knew her laptop "would be a great system for someone who doesn't need all the latest technology."

Moreover, as someone who hadn't started college until age 25 herself, Thomson liked the idea of helping young women find their way.

"I thought it was fantastic," she said, "because the deck is really stacked against them." Her hope, she said, is that her computer and others will help these girls flourish.

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