

Plugging into technology

New organization brings the computing life to disadvantaged students

**By Janet Meana
The Grand Rapids Press
17MAR1999**

Technology will come out of the shadows for some Grand Rapids high school students due to the work of a new organization.

Philanthrotech Inc., founded by Randy Bassin last fall, combines philanthropy with technology to improve the future of disadvantaged youth.

In February, Philanthrotech helped promote the second annual "Groundhog Job Shadow Day" by placing 21 kids from four Grand Rapids high schools into six local companies and hospitals for technology-related Job Shadowing. Students were exposed to Computer Networking, Electronic Graphics and Digital Web Publishing.

"It's wonderful, it really helped the kids a lot!" said Merdis Harris, a business application Industrial technology teacher at Union High School. They got to spend time doing something they might be interested in as a career."

It went so well a second job shadow day was held Friday.

Job shadowing isn't new to Grand Rapids schools but it was the first time it emphasized technical jobs.

Bassin, who has more than 17 years experience in the field of computer science, operates a home-based business, HOMEPC Inc. Over the years he has come to realize that from a humanitarian and social perspective, technology has a lot to offer.

"It provides compelling opportunities for kids," he said.

Philanthrotech's goal is to create technology-related projects that are integrated with educational opportunities. While in its infancy, the organization is focusing on students in Grand Rapids public high schools.

"We want to help prepare them to leave high school with skills that they can take right out into the work place," Bassin said.

He added that high school graduates lack technical skills, and not every student who is interested in a technical career has the luxury of affording specialized training or college.

"Philanthrotech's focus is really to try to catch kids who may not normally have great opportunities to see successful futures," Bassin said. Another Philanthrotech project that is just getting off the ground is the multifaceted PC2Earth.



PRESS ILLUSTRATION/DIANN BARTNICK

Old computers that are being retired by Michigan corporations will be refurbished and bundled with obsolete software. The systems will be donated to families that otherwise couldn't afford a home computer.

"Older technology can still serve very well as educational tools for kids," Bassin said. Another component to the PC2Earth project is disposing of computers that can't be restored. "We want to properly de-construct those systems and dispose of them correctly," Bassin said. In yet another project, Philanthrotech is teaming up with UCLA and a Hollywood company, US Interactive, to create a virtual reality game that will be used as a pain management tool in pediatric wards in area hospitals.

Bassin's vision is to use computers as a distraction to help kids deal with pain while hospitalized. The 18-month project will also provide high school students with internship opportunities, such as helping to develop some components of the game. They'll also learn how to integrate technological solutions into a medical environment.

"I think it's going to be dynamite, if they can get the funding we definitely have the kids," says Harris, who adds that she is impressed with Bassin's goals. "He's got a lot of good ideas and I'm excited to be a part of it," she said.

And the schools' part is easy.

"For us, it's just a matter of supplying the students, and we can do that. We always have students that are interested."

For information on Altrutech, call **(616) 204-4847** or visit its Web site at www.Altrutech.org.

This article and others reprinted by permission of The Grand Rapids Press.