

It's a house aptly nicknamed a "Vancouver Special" not just for its architectural design, but also because it's home to a special workshop where donated computers are refurbished and given to British Columbians who otherwise wouldn't be able to afford them. Founded by Robert Werner PEng, BC Digital Divide is a volunteer-run non-profit organization born from a posting on a classifieds website.



# Bridging the DIGITAL DIVIDE

Andrea Hodgins

In November 2005, a friend approached Werner, a UBC mining engineering graduate turned software entrepreneur, to find out what to do with a fairly new computer she no longer needed. Werner decided to place an ad on the popular San Francisco-based website, Craigslist, saying he had a computer that his friend wanted to donate to a family in need. Within 24 hours, over 50 people responded, and nine were deemed worthy recipients. Not willing to leave the remaining eight families without a computer, Werner put out the word to family, friends and the media. And so began Werner's quest to bridge the digital divide, the gap between those with access to digital and information technology and those without.

As the project grew, volunteers came on board including Bruce Steven whose interest was piqued after seeing an article about the organization in the *Vancouver Courier*. A tradesman for the Vancouver School Board and self-taught techie who Werner considers, "a hardware gem," Steven has volunteered countless hours inspecting hardware, testing RAM, wiping hard drives clean of personal data, installing operating systems and adding useful free software such as dictionaries. Steven has three technical counterparts and three additional volunteers oversee coordination, and website and database development.

When not involved with BC Digital Divide, Werner runs a consulting company, Innovative Mobile Solutions (IMS), which involves building customer software for companies such as SNC-Lavalin and Inco Limited. Recently, he's developed a mobile software product called Pocket Pollster, which reduces the

capture of data on paper forms. But, the BC native is quick to steer the conversation away from his busy consulting business and back towards BC Digital Divide. "We try really hard to get the best equipment we can. It doesn't matter if [the families] are poor. We're looking out for the best for our recipients," he says. In the present age of global technology, Werner likens not having a computer with being illiterate.

After having gone through a screening process, over 350 families have been selected to receive computers, with 75% living in Greater Vancouver, 20% in Kelowna and 5% in other parts of BC. Individuals and corporations donate to Digital Divide, but to date, the largest donor of computers has been downtown Vancouver-based software company, Pivotal CRM. When asked how the non-profit organization is funded, Robert replies, "There is no budget. If a company is thinking of donating money, we ask them to spend the money on parts."

Many recipients are new immigrants, some of whom arrive in the country with very little. Werner recounts how one family from Romania received a donated computer, and once able to afford their own, donated the computer to another disadvantaged family who had recently arrived from their homeland. A couple from Guatemala who moved with their two pre-teen children to the Lower Mainland is also reaping the rewards of owning a computer. The mother expresses sincere gratitude that her children have been able to learn the alphabet and develop math skills, thanks to BC Digital Divide.

Werner has received requests from as far away



## BC Digital Divide's Wish List

BC Digital Divide provides computers to people who would otherwise be unable to afford them. You can help out by donating your previously owned, working computer hardware or software. They are currently looking for:

- **Computers** - Any PC that is a Pentium 3 - 600 MHz or faster. With Macintoshes, G3 or G4 based machines (iMac, Powermac, iBook)
- **Monitors** - Any size LCD screen or any CRT (non-flat screen) that is 17" or larger
- **Printers** - Working printers with print cartridges, print cartridges (with or without a printer)
- **Scanners** - Any type
- **Other Hardware** - Hard drives larger than 10GB, RAM (any type), PCMCIA network and/or WiFi cards, network hubs and firewalls, wireless routers, optical mice, and any AC adapters.
- **Software** - Educational software, graphics software, and non-violent games

### Interested in Volunteering?

#### Current Needs

- Hardware techies
- Transportation help
- Web developers
- Board of Management
- Writers
- Coordinators (good e-mail and phone skills)
- Researchers
- Project managers
- Graphic artists

as India and Africa, but with shipping costs, it becomes too expensive for it to be worthwhile to send a computer from BC. However, he's considering the possibility of expanding to other cities in Canada and the US. For now, though, the focus is on serving the disadvantaged in BC. At any time, thirty people are waiting for a computer. "We're always in need of donations of computers," he stresses. While Digital Divide's biggest need is for PCs, memory chips are also high on their wish list. "We have a need for speed," Steven adds, chuckling.

"Why throw [a computer] in the garbage?" asks Werner, "Why not make it be used for another couple of years?" Questions from someone eager to bridge the digital divide, one computer at a time. Now that's special. ☒

To find out more about BC Digital Divide, visit [www.bcdigitaldivide.org](http://www.bcdigitaldivide.org) or e-mail: [info@bcdigitaldivide.org](mailto:info@bcdigitaldivide.org).



L-r: Robert Werner and Bruce Steven hold up crucial computer components. These will be added to computers, which will be donated to families who would otherwise not be able to afford one.

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