

This dentist does



Windows

TKM NA computers
escape the scrap yard...
live on to help others

Connie Richards, Office Manager for Information Management at Eastpointe, Mich., said “yes” when she got a call from the dentist a few weeks ago. “I hear you have some surplus computers that you would like to get rid of. Would you consider donating them to a good cause?” asked Dr. James Payne, DDS.

During regular business hours, Dr. Payne (yes, he takes a lot of ribbing about his name) can be found at his Northville, Michigan, dental office tending to the needs of his patients. Today, however, he was wearing another hat: that of computer collector, refurbisher, consultant, and technology benefactor to a wide range of worthy groups and individuals across the area. These are people who might otherwise be left out of the information revolution were it not for the efforts of Dr. Payne and his friends.

According to Connie Richards, when Information Management has a load of obsolete computers to dispose of, they normally just ship them off to a recycling center where the machines are sorted, stripped, and sold at pennies on the pound for the value of just their materials. A real shame when you consider that much of this old equipment is still in serviceable condition and capable of being put to use by someone with less demanding needs. That is, if someone else could just take the time and effort to repair, rebuild, reconfigure, reinstall, and re-purpose the equipment. Enter Dr. Payne.

When asked how a dentist — a demanding professional discipline in its own right — could become a computer expert, Dr. Payne explains that it was mostly a case of necessity combined with a frustration factor. After repeated on-site service calls and marathon telephone talks with the manufacturer failed to fix a recurring problem with his office computer, he decided to find and fix the trouble for himself. And, he did.



Open wide now — Dr. James Payne, DDS, is accustomed to working in confined spaces, including the inside of small computer systems.

In the process, he discovered that computer problems and dental diagnostics have a lot in common. Both disciplines rely to a large extent on the observation and interpretation of symptoms to arrive at a probable cause. That, and a good memory for technical detail, got him started.

When other people, mostly patients, heard that he could fix computers, they started giving him their old machines instead of throwing them away. Then, after he gave one of these reclaimed computers to a child from a low-income family (another patient) and saw firsthand the difference it could make, he was hooked.

Soon after, Dr. Payne decided to dedicate his spare time to fixing up old computers and donating them to deserving people who couldn't otherwise afford one. In the process, he even spent time as a repair technician-intern at a local retail computer store to further refine his technical knowledge and ability.



Jeff Holden (right), Information Management Network Engineer, helps Dr. Payne load up the old TKM NA computers for the trip to a new life.



University student, Scott Montgomery, using the Internet to research the technical details about an unknown computer part.

Today, all of this activity takes place in the basement of Dr. Payne's personal home in Livonia, Michigan, where two close friends and kindred spirits also help. One is Drake Davis, a retired psychologist (and another one of his dental patients), who got his start with personal computers at the county agency where he worked. When his department needed computers, Drake volunteered to rebuild some machines that were castoffs from another organization.

The other helper is Scott Montgomery, an engineering student at the University of Michigan Dearborn, and a longtime family friend of the Payne's. When Scott isn't busy repairing old computers for Dr. Payne, he's busy in school learning to design new ones from the ground up.

Over the years Dr. Payne and company have collected and processed more than 2,200 used computers. From these and another formidable pile of spare parts, they have managed to restore to working condition and donate over 500 finished computers to schools, churches, and disabled individuals and groups through organizations including Special Olympics, the Michigan Multiple Sclerosis Society, the Hemophilia Foundation of Michigan, and Head Start.

On June 25, 2003, Dr. Payne and his friends picked up 37 surplus computer workstations from ThyssenKrupp Materials NA. These were some of the old machines left over after the company-wide upgrade to Windows 2000 last year.

Although these old computers were too slow and too feeble to run the new operating system and applications at TKM NA (and too expensive and too time consuming to upgrade) Dr. Payne was thrilled. This fall will find them reborn at the center of two new computer labs he will build at a pair of area schools. Both schools are in low-income neighborhoods and would not be able to afford these facilities but through the good graces and hard work of this dedicated dentist and his friends.

Thank you, Dr. Payne. ■



A typical sight in Dr. Payne's basement — stacks of used hard drives await testing and formatting before they can be installed into newly rebuilt computers.



Retired psychologist, Drake Davis, reaches to get a grip on some unexplained behavior from the computer he is working on.