

You've got mail

Local man sends donated, restored computers to servicemen overseas

Meghan Chatham
Staff Writer

All James Payne wanted to do was keep the computer in his Northville dental office from crashing.

Now, five years later, hundreds of American soldiers stationed in Iraq are able to stay in touch with their families and friends on donated computers Payne has refurbished.

"I bought a computer for the office, and every Tuesday and Thursday, at 5 o'clock it went face down—you could set your watch by it," said Payne.

Computer repair technicians became a constant sight at his dental clinic, but they couldn't resolve the problem. Finally, Payne bought a book on computer repair and decided to see what he could do. He fixed it in about a week.

With that, he was hooked. The full time dentist continued to study computer repair, culminating an 18-month internship as computer repair technician. People began to bring him their old computers, which he repaired and donated to people in need—from schools to individuals with serious medical or physical challenges.

"You get such a positive

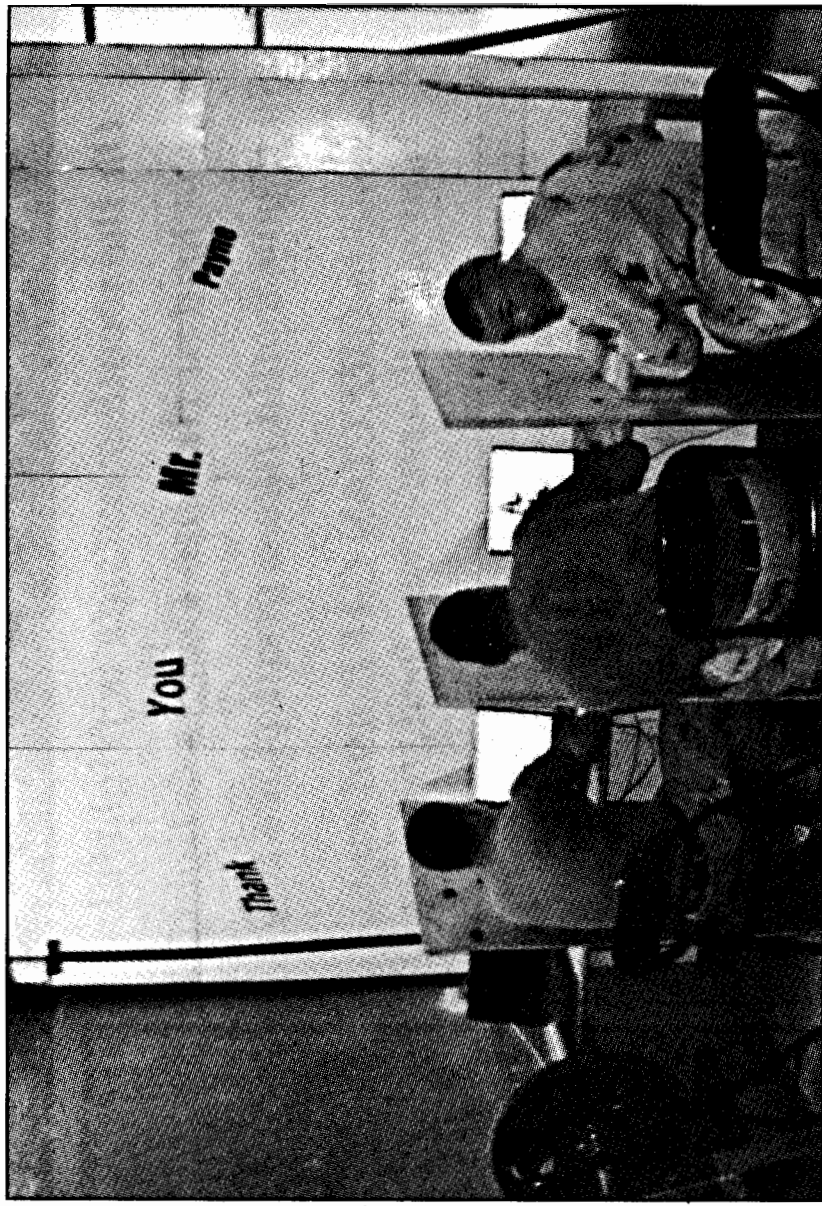
response from those people—it's kind of hard to stop," he said. "It's addictive."

So, in 2003, Payne and two of his friends—Drake Davis and Scott Montgomery—decided to take the next step when they registered as a non-profit organization, JDS Computers. The organization now has more than a dozen regular members, from other repair specialists to teams who pick up and drop off donated computers.

"Since we actually started, we have rebuilt and donated 1,623 computers," said Payne. "We've taken in over 5,000 and we've got ten 1,600 workable ones out of that. We've done all of this out of my basement and my garage—\$1.1 million worth of stuff."

Recently, though, Payne said that their focus has changed to somewhat as the group strives to pull together workable laptop computers for military personnel stationed in Iraq. The move was prompted primarily, he said, by reports of soldiers forced to wait weeks before letters from home could reach them. The group has shipped 154 computers overseas since Jan. 1, 2005.

For now, though, the soldiers are out of luck—the group has nothing more to send them. Part of the problem, Payne said, is that the types of computers they can



Throughout Iraq, American troops are able to stay in contact with loved ones back home thanks to computers refurbished and donated by Northville dentist Jim Payne. Soldiers who gain Internet access through the donated computers—such as these—often take time out from their duties to send a thank you note. But for Payne, a picture is worth a thousand words.

use are fairly restricted. For schools, they need to have Pentium III computers—no older and no newer—or they can't use the Microsoft Fresh Start program they need to complete the refurbishment.

"The ones that we're shipping to Iraq are Pentium II and Pentium III laptops," said Payne. "They're harder to come by."

The hardest part, he said, is turning people away. His inbox is crowded with thank you emails from enlisted men and women, including a two-star general. One

email even provided a photo that Payne truly enjoys—it shows some of his computers in use in a computer lab located in the heart of a palace once owned by Saddam Hussein.

Among the soldiers who have

contacted him is Pvt. First Class Michael Santillanez.

"Until recently I had limited use of computers at my location, as I don't own a laptop," wrote Santillanez on July 22. "Soldiers in the present military have the ability to communicate with family and friends on a daily basis. It is a

huge motivation to have that advantage. Receiving a letter in the mail is wonderful, but seeing your loved ones in real time is a blessing. Your gift is a great reflection of America supporting its soldiers in all we do."

For more information or to donate a computer, visit www.jdscomputers.net/firm.com. Payne can be contacted by email at jimpayne35@hotmail.com or by phone at his office at (248) 349-4111.

Donations are tax deductible and a receipt will be issued.