

Laptop donors really help boost morale of U.S. troops overseas

The old fogey in me remembers typing news stories on an electric typewriter when I started in this business. We got our info from visiting news sources, calling them by phone or getting mailed or hand-delivered press releases. That's it. There weren't even fax machines yet.

Today, we still go to news scenes and use the telephone, but we're so totally dependent on these computers and keyboards that it's frightening. I'm sure it's like that in every other business, but the fact hit me like a hard drive in the head Monday when our e-mail was down for most of the day.

"I feel like I lost my right arm," one of our 20-something reporters groaned. Even those of us a bit older agreed; this communication thing is really tough without the modern tools of communication.

Jim Payne, a dentist who lives in Livonia, knows all about the value of those modern tools of communication. His nonprofit JDS Computers takes discarded computers — desktops or laptops — and reconditions them and gives them away to people in need. The group,

with two other co-founders and a dozen other volunteers, has provided them for senior centers and inner-city schools and churches.

Most recently, he's been fixing up laptops and sending them to troops serving overseas. JDS was featured in a story in the *Observer* in April and, after that ran, I donated my failed laptop that had been stuck in my car trunk supposedly on its way to a hazardous waste day.

Payne told me at that time about some of the heart-felt thank you notes he'd been getting from U.S. soldiers who were using the computers to e-mail their family and friends back in the states. The messages talked of the improved morale and many offered blessings for the effort.

"Thank you for the computers," wrote Spc. Kristofor Jacobson in an e-mail. "They will get lots of service and bring some morale to the troops of A Co 50th. Knowing that they have a place to come to and unwind being able to talk to loved ones or check e-mail makes life away just a little easier."

In April, Pfc. Michael Santillanez of the 250th Signal Battalion in Tikrit, Iraq, wrote: "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."

U.S. Army Sgt. Jonathan Owen wrote on June 3, in part: "Nobody realizes the importance of staying in constant communication



An unidentified serviceman uses one of the donated laptops sent to Iraq by JDS Computers, a nonprofit group that refurbishes them.

with your loved ones until you're placed in a situation like ours. Once again, I would like to offer my thanks for such a gift."

Payne said this week that the 151 laptops he'd shipped were being used by 1,500 to 2,300 troops from Iraq to Afghanistan. One photo sent back shows laptops donated by Valassis Corp. in Livonia set up in the basement of one of Saddam Hussein's palaces in Mosul.

Just recently, though, Payne said he'd run out of laptops to donate.

He's looking for help. Laptops with at least a Pentium II system are being sought. Each will be wiped clean of all previous information, rebuilt and run through a series of tests to ensure they work properly before they're sent on. Donors may check out the Web site at www.JDSComputers.netfirms.com or call Jim at (734) 591-1559.

No matter how you feel about the reasons for the war on terror we're waging across the globe, I can't imagine anyone not feeling a sense of concern for our young men and women stuck there facing the daily dangers and wanting, if you could, to play a small role in helping ease that burden.

Does anyone else remember (and here, again, I'm talking to the fellow old fogeys among us) back when recycling was new and we were told we were doing something good for the environment? Even though all I did was donate a computer (it's Payne and his group that are doing all the work!), I still got that same satisfied feeling when I read these soldiers' appreciation for using these modern tools of communication to reconnect with friends and family.

You've got to love, by the way, how a dentist with the name of Payne is helping to relieve just a bit of the pain and heartache for our service people overseas.

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