

PROBLEM SOLVER: When social need meets eco-concerns, everybody wins

Treasure in that old hard drive

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Born in a land of scarcity, Ranjana Mitra grew up in Calcutta (now Kolkata) watching her grandmother collecting empty bottles, tins, paper and scrap metal and exchanging them for a little money from vendors.

Little did she know that what was simply a way of life in India would come to be known as recycling in the West.

Now living in Brampton, Mitra sees a "disconnect between ecological integrity, social well-being and economic development" in Canada — something that prompted her to launch her own effort to bring them back together: the Share-IT project.

The concept is simple: her not-for-profit group collects used CPUs, monitors, scanners, printers and cellphones, refurbishes them and gives them away to those who need but can't afford them — mostly low-income immigrant families.

"The mainstream environmental groups realize the need to embrace diversity, but just talking about our environment is not going to bring us forward in protecting it," says Mitra, an architect turned urban planner turned environmentalist.

"Environmentalists need to find out what the needs of the community are and connect with these social groups to ensure their sustainable development through environmental management."

'We have these people who are left out of the IT world because they can't afford it'

Ranjana Mitra

That became Mitra's mission when she began the Community Environment Alliance and initiated Share-IT — one of six programs the alliance offers — two years ago.

Since August 2004, Mitra and her two staff have collected more than 500 pieces of equipment and helped divert 10 tonnes of electronic waste from landfills — not to mention toxins present in computer equipment, such as lead, cadmium, mercury and arsenic, that would otherwise enter the ecosystem.

Established with a three-year, \$219,000 grant from the Ontario Trillium Foundation, the project has already given out 50 sets of refurbished computers. Most recipients are families on social assistance, identified in partnership with Ontario Works.

The initiative was recently honoured with the Chair's Award given by the Trillium Foundation, which doles out \$100 million a year in community grants.

"We just felt it has a lot of things achieved in one single package," said Trillium chair Helen Burstyn. "Obviously, they have a very good understanding of what the community needs and what it takes for a better environment in Canada."

De-Andre Anderson, 5, had been bugging his mother, Patricia Bekele, for a computer for school assignments since September, but buying one was simply out of reach for the recently laid-off hotel housekeeper.

"I know how my boy could benefit his reading and writing with a computer. And most of his friends in school do have access to computers and Internet," said the Mississauga resident. "But with my financial situation, I had to struggle to bring food on the table and wouldn't be able to afford one."

A social worker told her about Share-IT. After being screened, she recently received a 400 MHz Pentium II computer with monitor, keyboard and printer.

Paramjit Singh Walia arrived at the Advance Blvd. office of the Community Environment Alliance one morning after his overnight shift as a security guard, having learned of Share-IT from a friend. Like Bekele, the Brampton man's teenage girls and younger son needed a computer for schoolwork.

"You cannot survive in Canada without a computer, or you and your children would be left behind," a beaming Walia, 47, said after picking his up.

"With my new computer, I can even do my job search on the Internet. I'm just grateful," added Walia, a recent arrival and a mechanical engineer by trade.

Educated in India in urban planning and architecture, Mitra focuses her practice on incorporating environmental interests in urban development.

When she and her husband, Sabyasachi, came to Canada in 1998 with son Tilo, now 16, she knew differences in licensing and accreditation procedures would prevent her from working here as an architect.

Instead, she studied for a master's degree in environmental management at the U of T.

Volunteering for Toronto environmental groups, doing outreach in diverse communities, she realized there was a need to

Computer trash

Obsolete: 3.15 million computers and servers and 3.2 million monitors will have been deemed obsolete in Canada this year.

Recyclable: Most discarded computers have "useful life" remaining. Forty to 50 per cent end up stored in basements or warehouses.

Contents: A typical monitor weighs 27 kilograms and contains, by weight:

- Glass, 25%
- Ferrous metals 20%
- Aluminium, 14%
- Copper, 7%
- Lead, 6%
- Zinc, 2%
- Precious metals, 3%

Sources: Environment Canada, Electronics Industry Environmental Roadmap and Microelectronics and Computer Technology Corp.

link community needs with environmental concepts of reducing, recycling and reusing.

She saw the waste Canadians tend to take for granted. Environment Canada estimates that in one year alone, we throw out 23,349 tonnes of E-waste.

"These computers are not all unusable. But because of consumerism, we try to catch up whenever a new product is out. The old computers end up collecting dust in our basement," Mitra notes. "On the other hand, we have these people who are left out of the IT world because they can't afford it. If we can connect the social needs and environmental needs, we can certainly do a better job in protecting the environment."

The alliance takes its philosophy of linking issues of poverty, education and environmental protection into other areas: It offers educational workshops; eco-art classes to create treasures out of trash; a cellphone recycling project; and internships for newcomers.

In a way, it's all a very old idea. "I told my grandmother what I was doing in Canada and she said: 'What? You got a degree to teach people how to collect bottles and tins, and make fertilizers from compost?'"

"She asked me why it took so long for Canadians to learn what Indians had been doing for so long."

For more details on Share-IT, visit www.communityenvironment.org.



TANNIS TOGHEV/TORONTO STAR

It may look like just another of those dusty warehouses where old computers go to die, but Ranjana Mitra is ready to perform miracles in this Brampton back room — saving a little piece of the environment while giving struggling families a chance to bring their kids into the high-tech age.