

Turning trash to treasures

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

Little did she know what was 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 together: the Share-IT project.

The concept is simple: her not-for-profit group collects used CPUs, monitors, scanners, printers and cell-phones, refurbishes them and gives them away to those who need but can't afford them.

"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 envi-



Ranjana Mitra started the Share-IT project, which collects old computers, refurbishes them and gives them to families who cannot afford them.

TANNIS TOOHEY/TORSTAR NEWS SERVICE

ronmental management."

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 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 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.

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.

For more information visit www.communityenvironment.org.

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