

SFGate

Tenderloin residents get a high-tech boost

John Wildermuth, Chronicle Staff Writer

Sunday, March 2, 2008

(03-01) 13:57 PST SAN FRANCISCO -- Residents of San Francisco's Tenderloin got a high-tech boost Saturday when the St. Anthony Foundation brought in a crew of volunteers to minister to a long procession of sick, battered and out-of-work computers.

The line outside the center on Golden Gate Avenue started forming before the doors opened at 10 a.m. as people carried, rolled and dragged their balky machines in for some desperately needed - and free - repair work.

Robin Shockey, 55, wants to take a computer training class, but he needs a working computer to do it. That's why he was at the center with his cloth-wrapped computer nestled in his two-wheeled shopping cart.

"I tried to put in a repair disk and wiped out a lot of my files, so the computer is out of operation right now," he said. "I'm here to try and get it up and running again."

While St. Anthony's is best known for its dining room, which for more than 50 years has served thousands of meals a day to the poor and down and out, that role can give the wrong picture of the Tenderloin neighborhood, said Karl Robillard, manager of the foundation's employment program and learning center.

"You can just look around and see that the stereotype of the Tenderloin breaks down," he said as he pointed to the bustling crowd of all ages in the computer learning center. "There are an estimated 3,000 kids in the neighborhood who go to school, have homework and need to know the basics of computers."

And a number of those families have computers that they need to keep working, even when they can't pay the \$85-an-hour cost of much of those high-tech repairs.

The volunteer technicians, many of them from ReliaTech in San Pablo, expected to work on about 50 computers Saturday, fixing a variety of problems.

"Most of what we deal with are viruses," said Patrick Cheung, operations manager for ReliaTech. "We install anti-virus software, but we also deal with Internet issues, deleted files and a range of other problems, most of them basic but some more complicated."

Andrew Maker was there to get some additional memory installed on his computer. While it's not that hard a job, it's one he was nervous about doing himself.

"I didn't want to mess it up," said Maker, who had a new hard drive installed at the foundation's first computer fix-up session three months ago.

"I was skeptical when I came here, but when I got home, everything on my computer worked for the first time in months," he said.



Not all the visitors need their computers fixed. About 80 more were looking to learn computer skills and get tips about the machines they have. Members of the San Francisco Linux Users Group set up tables of donated and refurbished computers while volunteers from the city-run Project Tech Connect did one-on-one tutoring with visitors who had heard about the event from various nonprofit groups around the city.

"I sat down with one man, showed him how to get on the Internet and then looked up his hometown on Google maps," said Meagan Herfkens, who works at a Peninsula software company. "I helped another person set up a Gmail account" for e-mail access.

Other visitors wanted to know how to look for jobs, use e-mail or, for some of the younger users, find games on the Internet.

Poco Young got her first computer as a donation from San Francisco Network Ministries. Now her son has bought her a new computer, and she desperately needed to know how to move the software from her old computer to her new one.

"It seems like Mount Everest to me, which is why my new computer is still in the box," she said.

"Don't worry, it's all a piece of cake," one of the Project Tech Connect volunteers said as he sat down to help her.

What you can do

-- The St. Anthony Foundation Learning Center (www.stanthonysf.org) provides training in a variety of areas, including computer skills.

-- Project Tech Connect (www.SFConnect.org) is always looking for volunteers to increase technology access for all San Francisco residents.

E-mail John Wildermuth at jwildermuth@sfchronicle.com.

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2008/03/02/BA9EVC4TC.DTL>

This article appeared on page **B - 6** of the San Francisco Chronicle