



## Nancy Dunne: Of mice and mentoring the Microsoft way Friday, October 31, 2003, Page 1

Imagine an online world that encompasses senior citizens in Kangbuk, South Korea; immigrants in Brooklyn; the indigenous people of Ngobe Bugle, Panama; the homeless and poor near Paris and the Czech Republic's disabled.

Microsoft has this in mind with its latest philanthropic foray, Unlimited Potential, a \$1bn refocusing of its programmes aimed at closing the digital divide by training computer illiterates around the globe.

Other information technology companies have long shared Microsoft's worthy goals. Cisco has 10,000 Networking Academy programmes around the world. IBM has partnerships with school districts and states and is training the unemployed. Hewlett-Packard pledged \$1bn in 2000 and has equipped community technology centres in low-income communities in the US.

Technology has caused deep-seated economic and societal change but can it be harnessed for social programmes so the unskilled and unschooled can find meaningful work? Can it keep youngsters out of trouble in the world's tenements and raise living standards in entire regions?

Microsoft's UP initiative is a serious and creative attempt. It would promote life-long learning for adults and youths at community technology and learning centres worldwide. It would hire and train technology instructors and deliver technology curriculum, research, tools and help-desk services. It will also sponsor regional and global awards programmes to spur development of technology solutions that deliver social benefits.

Microsoft's efforts have paid off handsomely at two well-run community centres I recently visited. But it was not technology alone that made the difference. At both, highly qualified administrators and instructors have cobbled together millions in government funding - now in danger owing to continued congressional pruning of social programmes - along with foundation and corporate donations to produce safe, orderly, even exciting learning centres that have yielded real results.

Not long ago, Edgewood Terrace in north-east Washington, DC, was known as "the killing fields" or "Little Beirut". It had an open-air drug market and frightened and depressed residents, who despite a thriving regional economy, lived well below the poverty line.

That was before the non-profit Community Preservation and Development Corporation worked with government and corporate donors and residents to rehabilitate the 800 units and transform them into a gleaming, spotless, complex with six computer learning centres, a music recording

studio, high-speed internet access and a local computer network, two day-care centres, a medical suite and activity centres. It has apparently succeeded in its goal of creating a neighbourhood.

The drug dealers have been ejected and the grounds are spotless. The adults, who have taken the 18-week career training programme, have almost tripled their average income to \$26,800. About 300 youths attend an innovative, well-equipped after-school programme, which helps compensate for the substandard Washington schools.

Leslie Steen, president of CPDC, said technology had opened the world to the residents, showing them things they had never seen before and helping them embark on careers they would never have considered. "We don't just teach them hard skills, but something else gets instilled," says Robert Baskin, chief of staff of development programmes. "We try to make everyone understand the use of technology and the broader way it helps them to deal with life. They learn how to use resources, to organise, to set goals."

Microsoft's software donations allowed them to build the infrastructure that serves in classrooms and connects neighbourhood homes. "We get updated software all the time. We're not working on a foundation that is several years old. If you want to make this an economic tool, it's got to be current," says Ms Steen, who is now turning down offers of outdated technology.

The achievements of Project Reach Youth centre in the Park Slope neighbourhood in Brooklyn are just as impressive. Using computers, immigrants are sharpening their English skills, studying for citizenship, and learning about Windows. Last year 87 per cent of immigrants trained at PRY became citizens, three times the national rate. Seventy-two per cent of the students have significantly raised their English scores on standardised tests.

Although mostly attracting Spanish-speaking immigrants, the centre also began to draw Muslims after one of its tutors translated the citizenship curriculum into Arabic.

One of their successes is Julio C, a teenage entrepreneur who developed his own website. Although his site is a bit short on substance, he is proud of his achievement. "Feel free to marvel at my page," he says. "Well, I don't know what else to put up here. I will update when I get the time."

Once the participants develop their skills, many save up to buy their own home computers, which they use for e-mail, at-home learning and community activities. "Most of these people when they come in they didn't know how to turn on the computer," says Elsa Monteiro, development director of PRY. "Now technology is integrated in all our programmes." A programme for pre-schoolers features computers on tiny desks where the bouncing children can pop over any time in the "writing and publishing" centre. Teenagers come after school attracted by numerous programmes to build academic skills, such as Project Express, a journalism programme, as well as tutoring, career and college counselling, and mentoring. Many more billions will be needed to tackle the global digital divide but the work so far shows that, with time and resources, it is not an impossible dream.

It need hardly be said that this noble vision would also promote economic development and boost sales of information technology in a vast market where only 6 per cent of the population uses computers. But virtue should not go unrewarded.