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Back from the EDGE

D.C. Neighborhood Makes a High-Tech Turnaround

By Eric Adison

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By almost any standard, Edgewood Terrace, a decade ago, was a terrible place to live. Outdoor markets for illegal drugs proliferated in this mixed-income, public housing development in Northeast Washington, D.C., and the many early and often violent deaths that occurred in the area had earned it nicknames such as "Little Beirut" and "The Killing Fields."

But a determined effort by community residents and their government- and private-sector partners has transformed the neighborhood into a happier, more hopeful place. And at the cutting edge of this change for the better is a comprehensive program that gives Edgewood Terrace residents access to information technology.

The IT program came about after the neighborhood's residents association had approached a nonprofit organization called the Community Preservation and Development Corp., in 1991, for help with job training, employment connections, and neighborhood security (<http://www.cpdcc.org/gateway/intro.html>). CPDC first took the orthodox step of addressing the security issues and rebuilding the neighborhood. Later, in 1995, they purchased the Edgewood Terrace property with financial help from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), which also offered to include technology infrastructure for the community. The residents and CPDC readily accepted, and Edgewood Terrace became the flagship project for HUD's Neighborhood Networks Program (<http://www.neighborhoodnetworks.org>).

These days, kids at Edgewood Terrace line up excitedly outside, hours in advance, for CPDC-sponsored activities held in five Gateway computer learning centers, including structured computer technology exploration sessions—in which part of the time is devoted to math, science, and reading enhancement—and free-play sessions. During the summer, up to 120 children, aged four to 12, participate in a summer camp in which basic skills training is enhanced with daily, three-hour computer technology classes. A new Youth Gateway Learning Center is scheduled to open in September 2000, offering 7,000 square feet of space for three computer technology classrooms, a cyber cafe, a cyber recreation room, and several experiential learning areas.

In addition, CPDC has held several special events for youth, including a cooperative venture staged jointly by HUD Neighborhood Networks Division and NASA, through which young people were able to uplink to astronauts aboard the Shuttle Discovery while it orbited the earth.

Adults have benefited greatly from the technology program also. Over the summer, 110 low-income students from the community and adjacent neighborhoods successfully completed Career Enhancement Training. Graduates moved into jobs where they now are earning an average of \$23,000 per year at the entry level.

CPDC is giving computers to all of the residents of the 16-acre, 884-unit community in a program called EdgeNet, a unique computer network and community-wide Intranet site offering access to the Internet. The network uses thin-client servers—low-cost PCs designed to access data and applications over a network and considered by many to be the next big thing in IT.

The U.S. Department of Commerce, the Georgetown University Center for Communications and Technology, Microsoft Corporation, Verizon, and SiteScape Inc. are among the other partners on the Gateway project.

"The residents are really taking to the technology," says CPDC spokesperson Keith Kroell. "It's beginning to change their patterns of thought, the way they see each other, the way the community interacts. Kids are carrying assignments home electronically, and some parents are becoming concerned about their children's work for the first time, because they can see it there on the computer."

Seventh-grader Anthony Zeney is a regular at the computer learning centers. He's had a computer at home since he was four and had learned to play games, but the Gateway program has taught him how to design a Web site and use Microsoft Word, Excel, and PowerPoint, among other skills.

"I think it's helping the kids," he says.

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