

## Computer Moguls and Volunteers Team Up to Close Digital Divide

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The future of the Internet looks like this: wide-eyed, with breakfast crumbs on his cherubic left cheek.

His name is Robert Blakey, he is 5 years old, and he is hunched over a Gateway computer, clicking across the Web with the aplomb of a concert pianist.

He is exploring the science of gravity. Just don't ask him what he's learning. "I dunno," he said yesterday.



At the PowerUp computer center in Southeast, Robert Blakey, 5, and Shamal Lewis, 9, go to a science Web site to learn about gravity. (Lois Raimondo - The Washington Post)

Actually, Blakey has learned quite a bit – as have his 20 or so classmates, who are ensconced in a basement classroom in the Southern Ridge Apartments, a low-slung subsidized housing complex on the southeastern edge of the District. They are participants in one of the first sites of PowerUp, a national initiative to bring computers and the Internet to children in poor communities.

PowerUp, the brainchild of America Online Inc.'s chief executive, Steve Case; his wife, Jean; and Colin Powell, an AOL board member and former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was launched in November with plans to build 250 computer labs by year's end in schools and community centers across the nation.

Furthering that goal, Virginia is expected to announce next week that it will allocate \$3 million to build centers throughout the state, PowerUp chief executive Rae Grad said in an interview. Already, there is a pilot site up and running in the Gum Springs Community Center in Alexandria.

Illinois is expected to follow with an announcement to invest \$750,000 to build PowerUp sites, and discussions are being held with California officials, Grad said. About a dozen sites are operating now, in locales such as San Jose and Seattle.

To date, the Waitt Family Foundation, run by Gateway Inc. Chairman Ted Waitt, has committed 50,000 personal computers to the project and Dulles-based AOL has pledged at least 100,000 Internet access accounts. PowerUp, which is moving its headquarters from California to McLean, also is working with Powell's own group, America's Promise: Alliance for Youth.

There are many other programs that give away the tools of technology, especially in an age when wealth built on technology has spurred the growth of philanthropy. Microsoft Corp.'s chairman and his wife have the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which supports educational and health-care programs. And there's Cisco Systems Inc., which has the Cisco Networking Academy Program to teach students how to build computer networks.

But PowerUp, with its big backers and broad ambitions, is one of the most prominent to tackle the "digital divide" between those who have Internet access and those who do not. Urban households with incomes of \$75,000 and up are more than 20 times as likely to have Internet access as rural households at lower income levels, and urban homes are more than nine times as likely to have a computer, according to a recent Commerce Department report. What's more, whites are more likely to have Internet access at home than are blacks or Hispanics from any location, the report found.

Aiming to change all of that at the Southern Ridge site is an unlikely trio running the program – Mary Ellen Mallonee, a lawyer looking for a career change; Sarah Shimchick, who has been trained as a clown; and Laura Collins, a recently minted college graduate with a bachelor's degree in anthropology. All are members of AmeriCorps-VISTA, the domestic equivalent of the Peace Corps.

Collins, 23, was surprised by how little the children knew about computers, but she added: "What really surprised me was how quickly they learned."

She hovers over her young charges, teaching them how to build their own Web pages, how to research their favorite television wrestler, even how to give a Microsoft PowerPoint presentation. "I didn't know how to do a PowerPoint until I was in college," Collins said.

Yesterday, Collins tried to impart a lesson about innovators.

"What did Isaac Newton believe about gravity?" A computer posed the multiple-choice question. Blakey, the 5-year-old, pondered an answer, buying time by curling his index finger in a box of Wonka Nerds grape candy. Then he chose the second answer: "That there was no such thing as gravity."

No matter. There is time. For three hours a day during summer mornings at the apartment complex, PowerUp oversees a group of kids ranging from 5 to 14 years; in the afternoons, another set of children, about 12 to 15 years old, stops by for computer labs. During the academic year, the PowerUp site runs an after-school program.

Janice M. Williams, a representative of the YMCA of Metropolitan Washington, oversees the AmeriCorps members on site.

"This program is going to give them [the children] the leverage to compete with their counterparts," she said. "It's really been able to bring them into a world they haven't been exposed to before."

The owner of the apartment complex, Community Preservation and Development Corp., a nonprofit developer of affordable housing, also is rooting for the kids. After all, it's better to have them in front of computers than "hanging" at the shopping center, said Keith P. Kroell, the company's director of funds development.

Of course, the program comes with a potential side benefit for the founders: It can be used as a marketing tool. Every time the children connect to the Internet, they do so through AOL, and on Gateway computers. But Aili Jokela, PowerUp's marketing vice president, said, "We're very careful about not putting kids in a commercial environment where they're being marketed at." For example, she said, when the children go to the PowerUp Web site, they encounter no advertising.

All the same, the brand names flashing before the children's eyes are having an effect. Ask pigtailed Kimberly Holloway, an 8-year-old neophyte in the program. What does she think of AOL? "It's fun," she said.

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