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BRIDGING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE, ONE COMPUTER AT A TIME

By Noelle Sciarini on July 30, 2013 / 0 Comments



In 2008 Jack Bidlack, director of the [B. Side of Youth program](#) at [Eastern Michigan University](#), was part of a think tank tasked with trying to find ways to promote digital literacy and give low-income families access to technology.

“Eventually we asked, what if we could train at-risk youths to refurbish computers?” Bidlack said. After receiving approval from the [Ann Arbor Community Foundation](#), [Digital Inclusion](#) was born.

The five-year-old program originally started as a way to train kids on the use and maintenance of computers, but has since grown into a social enterprise that also provides tech support to computer labs and various organizations. The key to this has been a number of donations from different parts of the community including Washtenaw County, Dominos Farms and Toyota Technical Center.

“Originally with the donations we were getting one or two computers at a time, but once we started building partnerships with other businesses, we were able to expand our inventory quite a bit,” Bidlack said. “It’s allowed us to market ourselves and provide better service to our clients and partners.”

As a result, the students enrolled in the program get to work with both PC and MAC systems, and are also trained in customer service and other aspects of community outreach. By the time they complete the program, they’ve received 40-50 hours of training, and a \$150 credit to purchase their own computer so they can continue to learn at home.

Now that the program has been around for a few years, one of the main goals for the future was simply to get Digital Inclusion more exposure, which led to Bidlack submitting a business plan to the Pure Michigan Social Entrepreneurship Challenge earlier this year. Digital Inclusion was one of the [Social Entrepreneurship Challenge winners](#) led by [Michigan Corps](#).

“I had no idea what to expect, but we wanted to take things to the next level and [the contest] seemed like a good fit for us,” Bidlack said. It wound up being an even bigger fit than he thought when Digital Inclusion was awarded second place (and \$15,000) in the Emerging Company category.

Bidlack plans to use the money to continue building relationships with the community and eventually toward moving the program out of EMU and into its own retail space.

“We want people to see that this type of program works, and in order to do that we need to stabilize things a bit,” Bidlack said. “Once we’ve done that, my hope is to initiate similar programs across the state and maybe even the rest of the country.”

To learn more about this program, please visit their [website](#).

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