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'A game-changer'

Microsoft-NTUA-NTU collaboration brings technology to chapters

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FORT DEFIANCE — Sometimes the only thing standing between poverty and prosperity is access to technology.

Hopefully that will become less and less of a barrier to rural residents of the Navajo Nation as connectivity expands. In the meantime, five chapters this week got free computers and a day's worth of training on them courtesy of a partnership between Microsoft, Navajo Tribal Utility Authority, NTUA Choice Wireless and Navajo Technical University.

It's a pilot project that may be expanded if people are able to benefit from using the new machines.

The chapters chosen were Chinle, Fort Defiance, Kin Dah Lichii, Mexican Water and Shiprock, all of which recently had broadband internet installed by NTUA Choice Wireless but weren't using it to its full capacity, explained Deenise Becenti, government and public affairs liaison for NTUA.

NTUA had enlisted the help of the other partners to let chapters see what broadband can do.

David Yunger of GreenBridge Computing, which was contracted by Microsoft to install the computers and train chapter staff and anyone else who wanted to join in, said he was "excited" about the project because "I'm convinced every single person can achieve anything they want to." With nearly half a million Navajos, he said, "that's a lot of potential."

The computers and high-speed internet will allow entrepreneurs to set up websites, students to stream classes online and — something Yunger didn't think of until he came to the Nation — police officers to file reports without driving up to 40 miles to the nearest substation.

"(Kin Dah Lichii Chapter President) Roger (Shirley) called that a game-changer," he said.

Christopher Curley, solution architect with NTUA Choice Wireless, explained that each chapter would receive five to eight computers equipped with Windows 2016, all run through a server with multi-point access.

"That means each computer has all the memory, all the computing power coming from that server," he explained.

Yunger, assisted by his young son James, spent each day last week at one of the chapters, training people on the capabilities and possible uses of the hardware and software — perhaps the most important component of the process, he opined.

"The worst thing you can do is dump technology on people and hope magic happens," he said. "You have to make it relevant to people's lives."

Tamantha Curley had heard about the training from her brother, Christopher, who had helped set up the systems. She showed up for the training at Fort Defiance Wednesday.

A behavioral health analyst, Curley had recently moved back to the reservation from Ahwatukee, Arizona, and was working from home.

"I use Excel a lot in my work," she said. "They're always changing stuff, so any time you can get free training, you should take advantage of it."

Curley had been chatting with the chapter's account maintenance specialist, Gina Chischilly, during lunch break from the training.

Chischilly thought the new hardware, software and high-speed internet would be a boon to her community — "Now people won't have to go to MacDonald's (for free Wi-Fi) anymore" — but didn't see how it applied to her.

"I know what I need to know for my work," she shrugged.

But Curley convinced her to take the last half of the training, and she admitted she was learning a lot that she could pass on to others.

That's exactly the point of these initial trainings, Yunger confirmed.

"If we can get the chapter staff in here, they can share what they learned with the public, and the cycle keeps going," he explained.

That's all well and good, but what about when the server crashes or something goes wrong with one of the machines?

That's where NTU comes in. The university's information technology students will be tasked with keeping the systems running, preferably in their own home chapters.

"It will give our computer science students some hands-on experience along with the chance to give back to their communities," said Jason Arviso, director of information technology for NTU.

The university has its own motives as well, added NTU President Elmer Guy in a written statement.

"NTU has long had a plan in place to utilize its advanced e-learning resources to deliver general education and even more specialized programs to students at chapter houses," wrote Guy, "so that students can save money by staying at home and earning university credits."

One of NTU's missions is to "build an entrepreneurial culture across Navajo," Guy said, and the computers can be part of that as well — especially when used in connection with NTU's Innovation Center.

Samantha Curley said the level of technology available on the Nation has changed so much, even during the four years she has been living off the reservation, that it may be scary to some rural residents. But for the sake of their children, the most tech-savvy generation ever, Navajos need to step up and learn as much as they can, she stated.

"My son just made his own PowerPoint to present to his class," she noted. "He made some changes to a computer game he likes."

"He's in second grade."



SPECIAL TO THE TIMES | RAY LANDRY
Francis Redhouse, left, NTUAW government liaison, Gina Chischilly, Fort Defiance account maintenance specialist, and Bernadette Kee, NTUAW enterprise sales manager, test computers on Aug. 22 at Fort Defiance Chapter.



SPECIAL TO THE TIMES | RAY LANDRY
Gina Chischilly, account maintenance specialist, types on the new computer installed by Greenbridge Computing on Aug. 22 at Fort Defiance Chapter.