Computer recycler gives itself an upgrade

By SCOTT HEWITT
Columbian staff writer

Not afraid of mice, are you? Don’t be embarrassed to admit it — many people are. Especially senior citizens who have never held a mouse and students who can’t afford one.

That’s why CREAM — Computer Reuse, Education and Marketing — is offering free computer education classes and a free Internet cafe in central Vancouver. It’s there for folks who have never manipulated a computer mouse, traversed the globe via the Internet, or sent anybody an e-mail.

“We want to give free education away,” said executive director Osa Martin. “We want you to have a computer, not an expensive newspaper.”

On Saturday morning, CREAM unveiled its new digs at 5000 East Fourth Plain Boulevard, alongside Alberta Street, and the new Habitat for Humanity Restore, CREAM’s partner in keeping decent secondhand stuff out of landfills. Restore makes it with building materials; CREAM, which shares the Restore’s space, does it with computers.

Donated computers arrive at CREAM’s workshop and thrift store in the Restore space. They’re tested by volunteers.

CREAM, Page C5
and students from Clark College's vocational training program. The truly hopeless are disassembled and prepared for recycling — CREAM uses 80 percent of its income by selling these discarded electronic components at the CREAM thrift store. Those computers are loaded up with basic Microsoft software.

CREAM was born nearly a decade ago, according to Jim Mansfield of Clark County Public Works, as the federal government started considering the question of hazardous electronic waste — the mercury, cadmium and lead — in discarded computers. The city of Vancouver and Clark County started discussing ways to reduce electronic waste rather than stockpiling it away. The first collection brought in enough discarded electronics to fill two 50-foot trailer trucks. The next step, Mansfield said, was seeing how much of it could be returned to use.

"We started wondering, what if we brought together the recycling and reuse sides," he said.

CREAM was born as a county-driven program. And over the next six years, more than 200 computers were refurbished and given to people who needed them. All told, 20 million pounds of electronic waste was diverted from the waste stream and recycled or returned to use.

Because of changes in state law, CREAM has now spun off as a private nonprofit — working with $30,000 in start-up funding from the county and county, Mansfield said. It’s looking to raise about $50,000 more to keep remodeling its own space — adding a classroom, as well as more computers and software for instructors. He’s a little nervous.

Martin said there are 100 computers in the CREAM pipeline right now. That’s many times CREAM’s old rate of processing, he said.

"It’s great to see this stuff go out to people who can afford it," said John Walley, a Clark College student and computer help desk worker. "If both sides of the fence aren’t getting their hands on technology, some are going to get left way behind.

Right now, the education CREAM offers is basic Internet literacy for the mouse-fearing — how to do e-mail, how to move around the World Wide Web, how to post pictures or resumes online.

"Especially for senior citizens who are a little afraid of technology and they’re just trying to get over that barrier," he said.

Borry Bowman, the local Macintosh users group, called Apple Van, will begin meeting at CREAM. His mother, Oma, said she’s ready to sign up as an instructor.

Vancouver Mayor Royce Pollard said the CREAM program is a winner on many levels. It provides computer training for students and job seekers, a free space for eager learners, and a shot in the arm for the Fourth Plain corridor — one of the city’s biggest revitalization targets.

"Right now, not far from here, there are a whole lot of teenagers sleeping," he said. "They’re going to find out that they’ve got access to the whole world right here. What better place to do it?"

Scott Hewitt 360-735-5355 or scott.hewitt@co.columbia wa.us