Tuesday

E-equalizer
Houston banker
dreams of bridging
the digital divide
Houston

Houston Chronicle

NARROWING THE
DIGITAL DIVIDE

Matthias Asrat,
a student at
Lamar High
School,
reassembles a
computer
during an
evening class at
the Internet
Learning
Center.

Dave Rossman / Special to the Chronicle

By BARBARA KARKABI
Houston Chronicle

Fasika Asrat's eyes light up as her fingers fly across the computer keyboard.

With her teacher's help, the 11-year old pulls up her Web site. She plays around with her Web site for a bit before getting down to some serious work.

Fasika's goal is to set her Ethiopian-born mother up in an e-commerce business selling her own hand-made pottery and clothes. There are no visions of dot.com millions, just a little extra income for her family.

"Once they started building these Web sites, it really gave some of the kids an appetite to help their parents," teacher Glenn Whiting said.

A month ago, before taking free computer classes at the Internet Learning Center, Fasika had limited Internet skills. Now, Whiting says proudly, she is a whiz who gets more e-mail than he does.

Both teacher and student are part of a grass-roots effort to make computers more accessible to those who might not have the chance to use or own one.

Narrowing the digital divide is the dream of banker Dula Abdu.

For Abdu, the dream starts at a storefront on West Bellfort with 4,000 square feet of donated space from Weingarten Realty Inc., more than 60 donated computers, four volunteer teachers and a steady trickle of students.

To Abdu, it's not just about computer access. It's about training people — especially the economically disadvantaged — in skills that could get them better jobs and better lives. He believes that the com-

Digital

puter industry is open to anyone who invests the time it takes to learn, because it takes skills that are not defined by age, gender or ethnicity.

"To me, the digital divide is also an economic divide between the haves and have nots," Abdu said. "How do we address it? There is a huge need. If you try to take a summer course at Rice, it would cost a lot. One way to solve it is to offer free courses in PC repair, software and Web design."

Abdu's center offers classes for adults and children, but he is particularly anxious to work with children ages 10 and up. With an increasing number of jobs requiring computer and Internet literacy, Abdu is one of many people who fear the "have nots" will be left way behind.

Statistics support this fear. Although virtually the same percentage of advantaged and disadvantaged children have access to computers at school, disadvantaged children are less likely to have a home computer, according to a February poll by National Public Radio, the Kaiser Family Foundation and Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government.

The poll also found that the same is true of adults: 56 percent of adults who earn less than $30,000 a year have a home computer, while 87 percent of those earning more than $50,000 a year have a computer at home.

For the last four Sundays, Raschelle Grandison has made the 30-mile drive from her home in northeast Harris County so her son Trey, 15, can take the two-hour class.

A sophomore at C.E. King in the Sheldon Independent School District, Trey said computer classes there are reserved for the top 10 percent of students.

The rest of the students need it just as much, Raschelle Grandison said.

Whiting and Abdu agree.

"This is the equalizer," said Whiting, a businessman who volunteers his time. "Give me the bottom 10 percent and I will give you great workers. If we can reach them at 12 and 14, they can get the computer skills they need to go on to college, make extra money or get a job."

The group listened intently as Whiting gave them a Web address and made sure they all had e-mail addresses. About a third of the students have home computers, and Abdu encourages them to work on their pages at home.

If students aren't able to work at home, they can use the center whenever they want, like an Internet cafe — only free.

Once students overcome access obstacles, the next step is to overcome their fear of computers.

"I was afraid at first of the computer," said Matthias Asrat, 15, a student at Lamar High School. "I thought it was just too much work. Now I know it's a step-by-step thing, and I can learn it. I've started setting up e-mails for friends at school."

These days Matthias spends every spare minute on the computer and hopes to use his skills to get a summer job. He also plans to volunteer at the center when his classes are finished in a few weeks.

The center is still in its infancy. The staff is small and made up entirely of volunteers. A large crowd attended the center's March 31 grand opening, and guests included Mayor Lee Brown.

So far, news of the center has been passed by word of mouth. This is the first children's class, though one adult class has already completed an eight-week course. Another 50 or so students attend night classes on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays. Hours are 6-8 p.m. Mondays through Thursdays and 2-6 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays. (For class information or to volunteer, call 713-283-0756.)

Abdu has big dreams.

He envisions a network of Internet Learning Centers, where students pay for classes on a sliding scale, with the neediest attending for free.

First, he has to make the center on West Bellfort work. This summer he would like to keep it open from 9 a.m. to 8 p.m., but he needs more volunteer teachers.

Ruth Georgeson, a colleague of Abdu's at Chase Bank of Texas and supporter of his effort, believes he will find them.

"Dula is a great visionary and very resourceful," Georgeson said. "It's hard to believe what he can do with limited resources.

He's been able to recruit volunteers, get PC's and even real estate."

Abdu, who has lived in Houston since the early 1980s and is an American citizen, was born in Ethiopia. His parents died in World War II, and he was raised by relatives. In the early '70s, a time of great change in his country, he came to the United States to attend college, earning bachelor's and master's degrees in business.

In 1981, after a year teaching business and computer courses at the college level, Abdu came to Houston to visit friends and decided to stay. He worked at First City Bank, then moved to Texas Commerce Bank (now Chase Bank).

"I worked as a network manager and helped set up a PC network system for the bank in 1986," said Abdu, who is now a research analyst at Chase. "So I have lots of expertise in computers."

A great admirer of the late Congressman Mickey Leland, Abdu also worked on numerous anti-hunger projects. After Leland was killed in a plane crash in Ethiopia, Abdu thought about doing a project in his native country. After that plan was blocked, he changed his focus.

"I saw Mickey Leland go to Africa many times and I thought, 'If we had given them something lasting, he wouldn't have had to die,' " Abdu said. "Then I thought, 'I'm a Houstonian and a Texan, and I want to help here.' "

As the Internet took off, so did the digital divide, and Abdu found his cause. By giving people the computer skills they need, he believed they could get higher-paying jobs.

He began talking about his dream to anyone who would listen, but not all were excited about the concept. He formed a non-profit foundation, Appropriate Development Technology Inc., and slowly found a few people who shared his dream.

Donations of used computers came slowly, too, until Abdu found Technology for All-Houston, part of a national nonprofit group that, among other things, donates used computers to local groups such as the Internet Learning Center. (To reach the Houston office of Technology for All, call 713-961-0012.)

"People like Dula, who are out there trying to offer opportunities to disadvantaged people, are doing a world of good," said Lois J. Powers, executive director of Technology for All-Houston.

Eventually Abdu got 30 computers and 40 monitors from Technology for All and is scheduled to receive 10 more. But to get them, he had to donate numerous hours of his own time in community service to Technology for All.

His big break came last August when Weingarten donated the classroom space for a year. Volunteers and friends helped Abdu build walls, paint and put in electrical outlets. In all, the donated space, services and machinery would have cost him as much as $70,000.

Computer tables were made from material found in Dumpsters. Multicolored office chairs, office furniture and wiring were donated by various companies. When donations ran out, Abdu used his own money, though he won't say how much.

"It's my contribution to the community," he said.

Classes began in February. On a recent Tuesday night, the adult class had grown enough to split into three groups. One was busily working on computer repair — looking at mother boards and trying out different memory chips.

"I could only do a few things on the computer before," said Irad Ben-David, 17, a high-school graduate who works at Kmart. "Now I know what is inside. I love computers, and I hope this will help me get a job as a technician."

In another room, a group was working on a more basic level, guided by computer software instruction with some teacher assistance. A third group was busily working on Web pages.

Alem Imru was one student starting from scratch.

"I did not even know how to turn a computer on and off," Imru said. "Now I am setting up a home page. I'm so excited about what I have learned; so much is open to me now."

Imru, who currently is unemployed, hopes the computer training will help her get a job that pays more than minimum wage.

"I'm a dreamer," Abdu said. "My hope is to one day eliminate the economic divide. We have the potential to make it happen. In the past, it has been an issue of charity or welfare, but that hasn't worked. This is a way, with a little capital, to help society at large."