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ALIEF/SHARPSTOWN

Banker logs on to help children learn computers

By CAROL E. VAUGHN
Chronicle correspondent

Entrepreneur Dula Abdu reveres the role technology plays as the great equalizer between the "haves" and "have-nots."

The energized banker's devotion to bridging the gap between the skilled and unskilled workforce is so strong that he spends most of his free time with a non-profit endeavor he organized about 10 years ago.

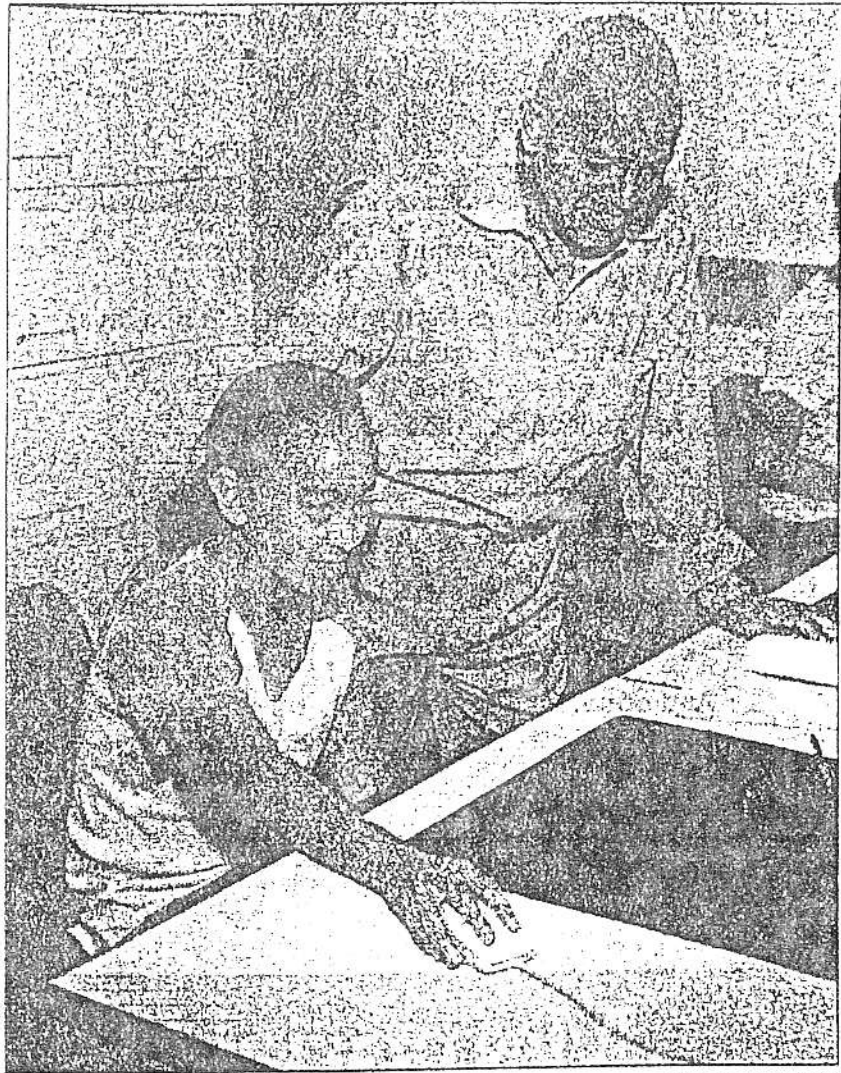
While other businessmen may be golfing, working out or attending fall football games, Abdu will be at the non-profit Internet Learning Center, 6589 W. Bellfort at Fondren.

His educational facility, located in 4,000 square feet of office space donated by Weingarten Realty, has been endorsed by Mayor Lee Brown and businessman Ben Love. Brown's own son-in-law occasionally volunteers there.

At the center, also called Appropriate Development Technology, Inc., there are 40 donated networked computers, complete with Internet access.

Novice users — both children and adults — attend classes staffed solely by volunteers. Classes and labs are held from 6-8 p.m. Monday through Thursday and 9 a.m.-4 p.m. Saturdays. Free classes are held 2-5 p.m. Sundays for kids ages 10-16.

This summer, two sessions of computer camp kept children out of



Jimmy Loyd photo

Dula Abdu teaches Fassika Asrat some basic computer operations. Abdu, a banker, offer free classes for children age 10-16 on Sundays, at the Internet Learning Center, 6589 W. Bellfort.

See BANKER on Page 4.

FROM THE FRONT / COMMUNITY

Banker

Continued from Page 1.

harm's way and in the know. Plans are in the works for after-school classes.

"Technology is becoming an integral part of society," Abdu said. "Most of these kids don't have a computer at home. Some kids were afraid to touch the computer when they came into the program."

Program coordinator Joan Brown helped children take apart hard drives and piece them together again in the summer camp. Many used Windows for the first time. Others mastered HTML and built their own Web pages.

She came to the center several months ago and was so impressed by Abdu's philosophy about enabling the disadvantaged that she decided to volunteer her own free time.

"You don't carry the person, to water to give them fish," she said of the saying she adopted from her mentor. "You teach them how to fish. That's what we do here."

She uses 10-year-old student Yakim Douglas as an example of how learning computer skills can build self-esteem.

"When he came here he was not focused and only wanted to play computer games," she recalled of his first day. "I got him focused on Windows. I began to see the excitement grow when I told him to turn on his computer. Just knowing how to pull up documents made him feel important."

Later Douglas progressed to web design. His mother, amazed

at his progress, saw a substantial difference in his behavior, said Brown.

"Sometimes kids need something to master so they can say, 'Hey! I did it!'" she remarked.

Adults are taught computer skills in an effort to bridge the knowledge gap between the generations, Abdu said. Computer skills also help empower adults, giving them a chance to land better jobs.

Training programs include web design, PC repair, networking certification, Internet fundamentals and Windows and Microsoft Office.

As an undergraduate, Abdu took many computer courses and later taught Fortran and basic programming at the university level. He holds a graduate degree in business from the University of Illinois.

In 1991, he opened the center, accepting donated equipment from corporations and individuals. Programs are interactive, allowing visitors to choose from hundreds of CDs for instruction. A volunteer teaches web design two nights a week.

Patrons can make donations to the center.

"We aren't doing this for money, because if we were we would be bankrupt a long time ago," the founder admitted.

In addition to being visited by local dignitaries like Mayor Brown, foreign leaders have taken notice of the center's services.

"They have asked us to duplicate this program," Abdu related. Future plans include opening centers at apartment complexes.

Communities in Schools project

manager Joseph Schofield was happy to receive Abdu's assistance in setting up a similar lab at Best Elementary in the Alief Independent School District.

His non-profit group wired and networked the computers and provided Best with ongoing technical support.

Work study students from Houston Community College come into the Alief school's classroom lab to give parents courses in Microsoft Word, PowerPoint, Excel, the Internet and more in a program geared for novice users. Classes at the elementary have been full each session.

"At our elementary school we realized there was a digital parody between parents and students," Schofield said. "These families need basic technology skills."

Abdu's motives in enabling the parents are purely unselfish, Schofield said.

"He is trying to provide computer technology to the have-nots," he said.

"He's very sincere, and he really has a heart to do this. They don't charge anything, and the expenses come out of in-kind donations."

While others talk about helping the disadvantaged, Abdu is a mover and shaker, Schofield explained.

"Research shows that when parents are involved in the school setting that students do better," he said. "With Abdu, the proof is in the pudding."

The Internet Learning Center is currently seeking volunteers, equipment and any in-kind donations for its services. For more information, call 713-721-9621.

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Community

Bridging the Digital Divide

.... One man's dream.

By Ken Ike Okere

Ethiopian born Dula Alidu does not look like a dreamer. Dressed in well-cut suits and always smiling he rather fits the image of a customer-friendly bank executive – which he is. But behind that endearing demeanor and ancient ancestry is the zeal of a dreamer, those few who create positive change for their society.

Dula's dream is to eliminate, or at least to significantly narrow, the so-called digital divide (a phrase often used to describe the disparity in computer/internet access between economic classes and even races.)

To achieve his dream he has put together a non-profit organization aptly called Appropriate Development Technology Inc., and with this he has opened two internet learning centers in the greater Houston area. Several more are billed to open as soon as his movement catches on.

The internet learning centers offer free computer and IT classes to disadvantaged children and adults. Adults who can afford it, are asked to make a token donation based on a sliding scale.

Currently at the headquarters on West Belfort road southwest Houston, there are over 40 computers and a hub for networking, web hosting, e-commerce etc. Both the large office and computers are donations from groups and individuals who share in Dula's dream.

Already 8-week classes leading to certification are being offered in PC Repair, Web Design, Networking, E-Commerce and general computer courses. They also provide access to the internet, web hosting and establish email accounts. Individuals, religious groups, community associations, and the unemployed are urged to take advantage of these opportunities and be a part of Dula's dream. For more information contact the Internet Learning Center at: 713.283.0756



Dula (right) helps a student during a PC Repair class, while a volunteer teacher watches closely

Dula's main dream is to open these centers at churches, mosques, community centers – anywhere there is the need –, train volunteers and students and hand over such a center completely to the organization or community that arranged it. Eventually he hopes to take his dream to Africa where the digital divide is more like a chasm.

'Basically, the divide is an economic divide,' says the soft spoken Dula at his center on West Belfort. 'Equip the individual with the skills he needs to survive in today's age and you uplift a whole family. Train whole groups and families and you uplift a community,' he said.