



NextStep in Reuse and Recycle

Used electronics find a home in expanded nonprofit

STORY AND PHOTOS BY SARAH MAZZE

The metal warehouse door ratchets up, letting in pale winter sunlight and a pile of shredding machines. Eighty-year-old Willard Petersen loads the plastic shredders onto a cart, accidentally dropping one in the process. The sound blends with the racket of hammering, drilling and computer parts spilling onto one another as volunteers and staff pour them from container to container.

"Hey let's plug those shredders in and test 'em." Lorraine Kerwood yells to Petersen. This is not an order but a cry of excitement from the executive director of the nonprofit NextStep Recycling. Kerwood, her face framed by short brown hair whose wisps sneak beneath the top edge of rectangular glasses, does not flinch at the fumbled piece of office equipment. Her intimacy with machines tells her the burly shredder won't be harmed.

The shredders have been donated for reuse or recycling, as has nearly everything in the warehouse Kerwood stands in, from the broken baling machine in the corner to the masses of disemboweled computers to the shelving the equipment sits on. Later she tells me that Petersen "does everything from install things to fix things. He's all over."

Kerwood herself is all over as we tour the former Computer Reuse and Recycling Center's new pair of warehouses. She calls out to workers, introduces the donated cat and hands off a free computer to Womenspace's lead shelter advocate for use by clients. This multifaceted enthusiasm has contributed to NextStep's rise from a one-woman computer rebuilding operation to its recent incarnation as a more than 50-person gig with a long list of accomplishments to its (new) name. To top the list, NextStep held its grand opening Feb. 16-18 to introduce the public to the new name and space on 10th and Garfield.

NextStep will recycle or resell anything and everything, from toxin-laden electronic waste to vinyl notebook covers. This diversification in its collections led the nonprofit to banish the word 'computer' from its title. Although others in the county collect electronic waste, all of the material heads to NextStep for recycling or refurbishing.

Since it incorporated as a nonprofit five years ago, the organization has kept 750 tons of materials out of the waste stream and given more than 5,000 computers to individuals and organizations from Eugene to Guatemala. Typically, the computers travel overseas by

barge in containers, although occasionally travelers have taken a couple of laptops to donate on their trip. Any nonprofit can receive free electronics, while individuals must be referred by a human services provider. Both groups can find applications on the website.

NextStep provides another social service to the community aside from giving computers: People who may otherwise struggle to find work, like disabled, young or retired folks, receive job and social skills training as they dismantle, sort and rebuild computers and other goods. Of those people, seven are volunteers who show up for more than 20 hours a week. Thomas Holme, who goes by RonTom, spends more than 30 hours a week rebuilding computers in part because NextStep "feels like home."

A few extra offerings, like electronic pickups for businesses and \$30 an hour computer repair round out NextStep's array of services.

Why the broad scope? In terms of job creation and use of resources, "Our goal is to try to create as much as possible out of the waste," Kerwood says. "We love to see stuff go back into play here in the community."

Anything sitting in the landfill takes up space and releases methane, a potent greenhouse gas, as it decomposes. Electronics, including cell phones, computers and televisions, contain heavy metals like lead, cadmium and beryllium that may leach into the soil and groundwater. Exposure to lead can cause brain damage and nerve disorders. The Computer Take Back Campaign reports that 40 percent of heavy metals in U.S. landfills come from trashed electronics, with 100,000 computers becoming obsolete daily.

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Then there are the resources saved. According to a 2003 U.N. study, it takes 1.8 tons of material, the weight of a mid-sized car, to make one new computer. In many cases, extending the life of electronics means one fewer new product made. In other cases, the products are beyond reuse. By separating out copper, plastic, lead and other materials, rather than shredding them together as some recyclers do, NextStep ensures that

someone downstream can transform all of those resources into new products. "We want to capture what's reusable because it takes so much less energy to use material above ground," says Kerwood.

Most importantly for its survival, NextStep creates revenue by processing and reselling these goods. With no grant funding, NextStep relies on money flowing in from recycling streams and the on-site thrift store to float its annual budget, which amounted to nearly half a million dollars in 2006 and should increase this year.

The resale branch of NextStep looks like any thrift store but with a lot more computers, ranging from \$4 to about \$200. The store also offers cell phones and board games — and once it had a wedding dress. "I'm one of those really weird people who believes there's nothing that won't sell, until it doesn't," says Jeff Garrison, who transformed the store from occasionally open into a venture that earns enough to cover salaries for NextStep's 18 paid employees.

Recycling revenue pays for NextStep's operational costs. Copper, coiled around the cathode ray tubes in monitors, brings in the most money by volume, gold the most by weight. Individuals and businesses can write off most donations for tax deductions.

But there is a hitch in this self-sustaining machine. NextStep pays to recycle monitors and television screens as hazardous waste, so the group charges the public to drop those off (fees vary, with a monitor costing \$15 and with discounts for seniors, nonprofits and schools).

Sometimes, Kerwood says, people get angry about having to pay and simply dump their waste around the corner. Once or twice a month, piles of monitors appear outside the building. When the pile includes hard drives, she says, "We go spelunking." Staff uses contact information they find on the drives to call back the perpetrators to retrieve their goods.

Jim Lynch, development director of the high-tech nonprofit TechSoup in San Francisco, explains that

with the drying up of environmental grants for handling electronic waste, NextStep's funding model is now predominant in the field. "It's been morphing over to that end over the last three years," he says.

NextStep uses a mixture of paid and volunteer staff, who have a blend of formal and informal training. Lynch points out that an unintended consequence of the previously popular model of relying entirely on volun-