teer labor often led to poorly rebuilt computers, which then went out to schools and non-profits. “Who needs more junk computers?” he asks.

NextStep guarantees machines sold in the retail store for a month and donated machines indefinitely. In the warehouse behind the store, a row of workstations house computer technicians who wipe hard drives clean and build new computers from old parts. Michael Day has formal training, so he works on high-end Apple computers and receives payment for his work. “I know she would love to just sit down and build a Mac,” he says of Kerwood. “Those days are long gone.”

Kerwood responds with a wince. Previously a massage therapist for 20 years, Kerwood calls herself “a person who thought that only smart people used computers.” After a 1999 computer course at LCC, she fell deeply in love with Macs and restoring old machines, or toasters, as she calls the beige boxes. She started out by giving computers to classmates when she went back to school for social work. As demand increased, her informal operation grew to include Day, teacher Foss Adams and a handful of occasional volunteers. In 2002, the group moved to her mother-in-law’s garage with the name MacRenewal. When it moved again to a commercial location and began accepting donations, the organization became the Computer Reuse and Recycling Center since people dropped off PCs as well as Macs. The new warehouses, of course, came with a new name.

In one warehouse, volunteers and staff dismantle floppy disks, television screens and computer monitors. Copper coils go into one box, gold plated circuit boards into another and the lead-heavy cathode ray tubes (CRTs) from TVs and monitors into another, much larger box. NextStep sends the monitors, containing 4-8 pounds of lead each, to Earth Protection Services, Inc. (EPSI) in Tigard, which Lynch calls “a pretty green company.”

COURTESY OF NextStep

‘Our biggest challenge is just education and outreach, letting people know we exist and the importance of what we do.’ — Lorraine Kerwood

A recent report exposed unsafe practices for U.S. prisoners forced to recycle electronics, but Kerwood says that none of her volunteers or staff are exposed to any toxics. NextStep workers dismantle electronics and then send the glass-encapsulated toxics to EPSI for processing. Greg Sampson, Vice President of Electronics Recovery at EPSI says of NextStep and Kerwood, “They’ve got extremely high standards as far as how the materials are handled. She makes every effort to make sure that things are recycled in the appropriate manner.”

From Tigard, the CRTs travel by barge to LG.Philips in Brazil for processing. Sending toxic materials overseas can be controversial; some recyclers have taken advantage of poor labor and environmental standards in developing nations or simply dumped containers of electronic waste with no accountability for proper recycling. Moreover, for the 140 developing nations (including Brazil) that have signed the Basel Convention, the international treaty banning the import of toxic waste, it’s illegal to receive toxic waste.

However because LG.Philips uses the old CRTs as a resource to make new CRTs comprising 98 percent recycled material, the tubes are considered a resource rather than waste. Brazil, like many other Basel Convention signatories, permits the import of used CRTs for so-called glass-to-glass recycling. According to Kerwood and Sampson, LG.Philips recently built a new facility to handle toxic materials with state-of-the-art equipment designed for environmental safety.

But you don’t have to travel to a developing country to find overwhelming waste issues. Styrofoam is the bane of many a landfill; some cities, including Portland, have outlawed use of the lightweight packaging for prepared foods. Composed of 98 percent air, Styrofoam takes up huge amounts of space and prevents other items from decomposing by separating them from one another.

This year’s Styrofoam Roundup event was hosted by NextStep with partners including Master Recyclers and Lane County. In two weeks, NextStep accepted 19,000 pounds of Styrofoam from residents for free recycling. NextStep now accepts Styrofoam year round for a small fee. Los Angeles is borrowing this cutting-edge resident-focused model to deal with that city’s plastic problem.