

# ONE PERSON'S TRASH

Plug into empowerment with NextStep's ePower program BY RICK LEVIN

NextStep Recycling Executive Director Lorraine Kerwood wants to emphasize that there is no “away” in thrown away — all that crap we shove “out of sight, out of mind” remains on-site somewhere, perhaps in another state, another country, outer space. When it comes to waste, everything that disappears must re-emerge. This is especially true of what Kerwood calls “the tide of electronic waste going to shredders.”

In an effort to stem the slosh of old laptops, cell phones and other electronic gadgets piling up in back drawers, boxes and landfills, NextStep has inaugurated a new program, ePower Our Community. The program, Kerwood says, “is an attempt to put the breaks on the ‘recycle first’ mentality and turn people’s mind to ‘reuse until used up’ first.”

Most impressively, the ePower program utilizes the electronic waste it receives to create educational opportunities in the form of literacy and job training. The nonprofit organization, in partnership with UO’s Center for Advanced Technology Education (CATE), provides internet literacy training to Eugene’s more marginalized students. “They send their kids to us that don’t have technology at home,” Kerwood says of local school districts. “We teach them to use the computer more as a digital tool rather than something to play games on.”

Once the training is complete, NextStep sends each student home with a free laptop.

Having years ago overcome her own fear of computers, Kerwood understands the ways technophobia can slam the door of opportunity on otherwise able-bodied, able-minded



LORRAINE KERWOOD PHOTO BY ROB SYDOR | DIGITALLATTE.COM

people of any age. “It’s a new effort of ours to expand the educational outreach that we provide the community,” she explains of ePower, noting that in Oregon schools there is approximately one computer for every 10 students. The new program, then, is “based on bridging the educational divide,” Kerwood says.

Dig it: You drop off that old laptop at NextStep (a tax write-off); locally trained and professionally certified technicians strip it down for parts and rebuild it; the laptop is used to train disadvantaged students, who then get to keep the computer; and — viola! — one more citizen is empowered.

“Everything about waste is a circle,” Kerwood says, adding that all of the e-waste deposited at NextStep “keeps

31 people and their families in income, offers education to hundreds of people and re-trains people with viable skills.”

The revolutionary oomph of NextStep’s ePower program cannot be overstated. In these dark times of economic despair, political cant and global enviro-wreckage, it’s easy to forget that realpolitik is always local. Kerwood’s focus on tech-literacy addresses the elephant in the room: Socioeconomic advantage has always been an issue of access, and these days the insidious mechanisms keeping the disadvantaged classes shut out from technological empowerment are largely self-perpetuating.

“Everything is digital now,” Kerwood says, “and if you don’t have access to technology you are so left in the dirt.” One of the struggles NextStep faces, she adds, is helping Eugene’s business community understand that the ePower

program is, at the immediate local level, a win-win-win: Everything donated to NextStep is processed locally, creating more people with more employable skills, and channeling electronic goods and services back into the community.

“Individually, people get it,” Kerwood says, “but to a business, it gets lost in translation ... The economic engine that drives electronic sales is enormous. It means that there’s this huge flow of material that still has a value, that’s still usable. If businesses understood that piece, then they could really see their material create change in our community.” **ew**

To learn more about NextStep’s ePower Our Community program, go to [nextsteprecycling.org](http://nextsteprecycling.org), email [info@nextsteprecycling.org](mailto:info@nextsteprecycling.org) or visit the store at 2101 W. 10th Ave.

## Lane County Commissioner ROB HANDY



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