workventures

The social Impact of technology Changes Communities:
From anger and violence to hope and opportunity

A Social Enterprise NGO, WorkVentures and Microsoft develop an IT Connect Technology Training Centre to address unemployment, poverty and violence in Aird's, N.S.W.

It's a disconcerting experience listening to Frances Jamieson, manager of the Airds Local Enterprise Centre, describe what the Airds community was like just ten years ago. Her gentle eyes and soft Scottish accent are at odds with the brutal scene she paints. "If you ask me to describe what it was like, I immediately have a vision of an upturned table with four holes in the bottom. The table was the only protection for the kids who hid behind it when a drug dealer broke into the house and attacked with a pitchfork. The children were able to protect themselves with the table, and eventually escaped through the window. But one man was impaled in the chest. There was blood everywhere. I had to organise for that to be cleaned up – and it wasn't the first time. It was my job was to pick up the pieces after violence. Airds was a horrible place to be. It used to be like a war zone."

Airds is only an hour's drive from downtown Sydney, but it could be like another country for the kids growing up there. With five large public housing estates in the area, there is a significant concentration of poverty. Unemployment is between 25-30% in many of the estates. Frances started working for Housing NSW as the area's Team Leader ten years ago. At the time, the estates were under the control of drug gangs, and violence (shootings, stabbings, home invasions and fire bombings) was not uncommon. Five years of being called in the night to clean up after the violence, and watching drug dealers ruin young lives, began to take its toll, and Frances, with the enthusiastic support of the Department of Housing, decided to do something about it. A big part of the solution was to provide services and a safe place that would

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engage the residents. Particularly Aird's youth. The community itself was asked what they wanted. The answer was an 'enterprise centre'. They wanted to be able to develop the skills to enter the workforce.

At about the same time, one of Microsoft's community partners, WorkVentures, a social enterprise NGO, approached Frances with an idea to develop an IT Connect technology training centre for Airds. As a Community Microsoft Authorised Refurbisher (MAR) and a Microsoft Unlimited Potential Community Technology Skills program partner, WorkVentures could provide computers, software and training programs using Microsoft curriculum. WorkVentures and Microsoft had already joined with the NSW Department of Housing to develop four other IT Connect centres in NSW housing estates. With the leadership of Frances, and following the direction of the Airds community, the WorkVentures Connect@Airds Local Enterprise Centre was born. With community consultation, a range of courses were developed to offer the computer skills necessary for a variety of employment purposes as well as the development of small enterprises. The Centre was then fitted with 20 refurbished computers, loaded with Microsoft software, and Microsoft curriculum.

The new Enterprise Centre was staffed by Frances, as the "Enterprise Manager', an administrative trainee, two program coordinators, and an IT trainee – many drawn from the community and given the training necessary for their jobs. The word began spreading that there was a place that cared about helping, and provided the training needed to pursue opportunity. The sense of community empowerment was huge, and change in the community is now manifestly evident. Control has been taken from the drug gangs, and the Airds Centre has become a focal point for hope and economic advancement.

Frances talks about one client as a good example of the personal impact of the centre. This client had been in and out of prison for 10 years. It was impossible for him to find a job. One day he dropped into the Centre. He had no idea how to use a computer, and didn't think he could learn. But with patience, guidance and application he progressed through classes and learned a variety of IT skills. Finally he was ready to apply for a job and sent in the resume he had developed with the help of the Centre. He got the job the next day.

"I love my job now," says Frances. "It's a privilege to work with these kids. I see the best they can be. Their lives have changed, and so has mine."

Missy

One of those kids is Missy, a bright, attractive young woman. Missy was raised by a single mum. Her two sisters left home to have a better life, but Missy stayed with her mum in the Airds housing estate. She wasn't motivated at school and wanted to leave by year 10. Her mother encouraged her to stay through year 12, but she didn't study, rarely did her assignments, and had no view of the future. "I felt stuck,' she says. "Mum didn't have a job, so I couldn't get advice on how to prepare a resume, or apply for a job, or do an interview. I mean, I went to interviews, but never got the job. I was very discouraged."

Missy felt she had nowhere to go. Girls around her were having babies, but she knew that she didn't want that lifestyle. So she started on Work for the Dole (a government funded program where unemployed individuals work on community projects in return for unemployment benefits), and was assigned to do some work at the Airds Local Enterprise Centre.

According to Frances, when she met Missy, "I saw a beautiful, aware person. And I thought, 'what's going on here, she should be doing better than this.'" Missy was encouraged to sign up for one of the IT Connect courses, where she became proficient in a whole spectrum of administrative IT skills, including word processing, data entry and spreadsheets. Importantly, she was able to relate these skills to job seeking, and develop the confidence to apply for jobs again.

Following her IT Connect courses, she was hired after her first interview and now has a job with the responsibility of helping run a steel pole and accessories company – preparing quotes and sending emails, doing spreadsheets, tracking supplies, and managing the delivery system. She loves her job and her new responsibilities. "A couple of years ago I felt stuck and couldn't see a way out of the housing estates," Missy remembers. "It seemed hopeless. Now I'm happy with my job and I'll stay here awhile and advance my career, but I don't want to be living in Airds forever. For the first time I can see a way out. I've got control of my life now, and after a few more years experience I'll be able to move to a more pleasant, peaceful environment. I finally feel confident about the direction of my life."

WorkVentures IT Connect

"Our low cost refurbished PCs connect an increasing number of disadvantaged people to employment, to learning, to family, to society, and to each other." Anthony Cammell, Head of Marketing and Community Partnerships, WorkVentures

WorkVentures is a social enterprise NGO and has been a partner with Microsoft Australia for over 25 years. Three years ago the Microsoft/ WorkVentures partnership won the Prime Minister's Award for Long Term Contribution to the Community.

The organization operates in the community as a catalyst for social change by undertaking initiatives to empower disadvantaged people to build positive futures. Computer refurbishment and providing opportunities through education and IT training are core programs in their work in the community. WorkVenture has recently provided its 10,000[th] customer with a refurbished PC – all of them delivered to disadvantaged individuals or NGOs who provide related services to underserved communities. WorkVentures also facilitates the Microsoft training curriculum and train the trainer programs, developed and delivered through the Microsoft Unlimited Potential Program.

WorkVentures is guided by five pillars that test and align existing and proposed strategies:

- **To narrow the digital divide** that exists in disadvantaged and isolated communities through the MAR computer refurbishment program, developing IT Connect Centres, and IT training programs;
- **Create pathways and opportunities for employment** through IT training, traineeships, its job network and technology repair services;
- Support individuals and communities to **build sustainable small enterprises** through Local Enterprise Centres;
- **Encourage individuals back into learning** through lifestyle and educational programs in strategically located IT Connect Centres;
- Work with Indigenous people and communities to **identify and support sustainable solutions to long-term issues**, and to be an agent for change and progress in their communities.

The Community MAR program in particular benefits the community in 4 principal ways.

1. It helps mitigate the growing environmental problem of discarded PCs. Large companies and government in particular, are able to recycle their computers through a Community MAR. WorkVentures' relationship with Westpac, one of Australia's leading banks, provides a strategy for Westpac to manage computer redundancy in a socially responsible manner. WorkVentures picks up superseded computers and at their own facility cleans the hard drive and performs any required maintenance, and loads them with Windows XP Pro and Office 2003, donated by Microsoft. Computers not suitable for redistribution are used for parts, maximising the environmental sustainability.

2. Disadvantaged communities and individuals have a source of reliable, low cost computers, helping address the social problems of the Digital Divide. NGOs can source their computers through WorkVentures and other Community MAR's, and either use them for their own programs or provide them to disadvantaged clients. WorkVentures creates three different technology packs to suit a variety of needs, and a fixed term Internet connection is included to start them on their way.

3. Throughout the refurbishment process WorkVentures provides employment and training to disadvantaged individuals interested in working in the technology industries. In the technical process they acquire the valuable skills, experience and confidence to pursue a career in IT, and in the call centre they are given what is often their first responsible professional position.

4. For WorkVentures, the Community MAR program enables hardware and software to be accessible through the IT Connect centres in public housing estates. These Connect centres currently provide over 12,000 residents with the opportunity to access Information Technology, gain new skills, and make a difference to their own lives. Microsoft plays an important part in the ongoing provision of these services.

"Our Connect centres are a place in the community where people can come to begin the process of realising their potential and reaching for their dreams. The centres offer people a safe, respectful and non-judgmental environment where they are valued as individuals and given the opportunity to learn the skills they need to better their lives." Anthony Cammell, Head of Marketing and Community Partnerships, WorkVentures.

Craig

Craig was a typical kid growing up around the housing estates. He was uninspired by school – preferring to concentrate on the social life available – smoking marijuana by age 14, then taking up alcohol in a big way

by age 16. With no motivation to concentrate on his studies, he would spend time in the classroom drawing marijuana leaves in the back of his notebook, and was constantly in trouble. But he was good with his hands, so he quit school at year 10 and took up a carpentry course at the local vocational college, TAFE. After the first year he quit that as well to try an apprenticeship as a plasterer. His drinking habits hadn't changed though, and he drifted from job to job.

However, he did have a dream. "I knew I had the ability to run my own business," says Craig, "but I didn't know how. I had no idea what was required.

Anyway, I felt a bit lonely and had no motivation." With no business or computer skills, and no direction or real plan for the future, he was adrift. Even after he had begun a relationship with his partner, Bianca, he maintained his drinking habits. "Between jobs I sat on the couch a lot," he recalls. "The future was always a blank."

Things changed when Bianca fell pregnant. With the birth of Breeanna a light came on for Craig. "I realised I had a family to think about," he says. "It was a real wake-up call."

He had heard about the Airds Local Enterprise Centre, and one day he took a look at their Newsletter. He decided to give it a try. He was interested in gardening, so he took a gardening and home maintenance course that gave him the computer skills to run a small business.   His ability to develop competence in IT surprised and pleased him. He was hooked. Now he's finally finishing his TAFE course, has already started his own handyman business, and has stopped abusing alcohol. "It all started when I came here," says Craig. "I learned computer skills and how to develop a small business. Now I can do quotes and invoices, emailing and Internet banking.   I've designed my own logo and business cards. I can see my future now…a future for my family."

Craig is now a proud man, preparing for the life he wants.

For more information:

WorkVentures - http://www.workventures.com.au/index.htm

Microsoft Authorised Refurbisher (MAR) program - http://www.mar.partners.extranet.microsoft.com/APAC.aspx