

Donations Have Life-Changing Potential

With a \$55 million commitment and a mammoth goal, Microsoft helps individuals to reshape futures.

By Aaron Halabe

Exiled to Houston after Hurricane Katrina, Lisa Burds, a single parent with three children, suspended her job-hunting and higher-education goals. When she returned to Louisiana last summer, she found that her home needed repair – and her resume, too.

She enrolled in a computer training course that introduced her to Excel and Word applications. “I was able to enhance my typing skills ... and I found that there were more job offers,” said Burds, who recently secured an office job with H&R Block.



Microsoft is part of Burds' ability to remap her future: After hurricanes Katrina and Rita, Microsoft and its employees contributed \$11 million of cash and software, some of which went to the training center where Burds learned new skills. Burds also is benefiting from separate Microsoft grants to study early childhood education.

“Hopefully, in two or three years, I can have my own daycare [program] or be a director of a Head Start center,” she said.

The Bigger Goal: Skills for Everyone

Yesterday in Louisiana, Steve Ballmer announced nearly \$1.7 million in aid to support continued technology training for the Gulf States. It is a fraction of the \$55 million in cash, software, and curriculum that Microsoft announced it would give through the company's [Unlimited Potential](#) program.

The contribution comes with an ambitious goal for the United States: by 2010, provide basic technology skills to every young person, jobseeker, displaced worker and individual in the workforce who seeks those skills.

The company will achieve the goal by working with nonprofits, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and state and local agencies that administer grant funds and provide technology training, said Andrea Taylor, Community Affairs director.

“We are not workforce-development experts, so we're uniting an important network of partners who can help us craft and implement our programs,” Taylor said. “They, in turn, reach out to the underserved communities. This wholesale approach is the way we think we're going to achieve our inspirational goal.”

Since its inception in 2003, Microsoft Unlimited Potential has provided \$255 million to fund more than 800 technology access and skills training projects in 100 countries.

Gulf Coast Commitment Renewed

Last summer, Community Affairs representatives visited Houston, New Orleans, and Baton Rouge to take the pulse of the community's needs. New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin, previous grantees, and community leaders expressed desire to continue workforce training for residents returning to the city and those still displaced

nearby.



Several groups of Microsoft employees have contributed to stabilize people's lives in Gulf Coast communities.

"The trip made us realize that ... to have a sustainable impact on the rebuilding of the community, there had to be more than a one-time commitment," Taylor said.

New Orleans' population is at about half of its pre-Katrina number. But the city has added jobs at an average rate of 1,900 new jobs a month since June 2006. School enrollment in nearby Lake Charles and employment in Pascagoula, Mississippi, have reached or surpassed pre-storm levels. As people again put down roots, the Unlimited Potential grants will help.

The \$1.7 million grant will enable four Gulf States' training centers to deliver Digital Literacy courses to individuals and via train-the-trainer programs. The grant includes \$425,000 to the Greater New Orleans Economic Development Foundation and additional grants to local corporations, the Houston Urban League, Technology for All, the United Negro College Fund, and Xavier and Dillard universities – two historically black colleges in New Orleans.

Bay-Area Support Boosts Physical Accessibility

The Silicon Valley Community Foundation, which focuses on improving local economic opportunities through technology training and workforce development, will receive an Unlimited Potential grant of \$250,000.

One beneficiary of that gift is TransAccess, which makes technology available to people with physical challenges. It offers a lab in San Jose and a mobile lab that travels to area homes and schools, said Cathy MacCaul, communications manager for Microsoft's Corporate Affairs.

The program is paying dividends. McCaul recounted feedback from one participant who had a spinal cord injury: "When you have a disability like mine, you tend to lose your confidence, especially when you've been out of work as long as I have. ... [TransAccess'] support [gave me confidence to try again. I had my job interview, [and] it went well."

MS Weighs in on Use of Federal Funds

This week, Microsoft also is sponsoring and participating in the [National Association of Workforce Boards](#) annual conference in Washington, D.C. The association represents 600 local boards nationwide. They design workforce-development services and oversee the use of federal funding sources.

"As a responsible corporate citizen we have a great duty to serve others," Taylor said. "We also have a very large voice, and people listen. We're stimulating the discussion about the role IT skills can play in creating economic opportunities. We have big and ambitious goals, but we're uniquely positioned because of our know-how and the partnerships we've formed."

Employees Can Contribute

Employees can [learn more](#) about the programs around the world that Unlimited Potential supports. Employees also can [learn more](#) about how to volunteer for, or donate directly to, a variety of nonprofit organizations.



Lisa Burds was a featured speaker at Microsoft's announcement Monday that it would contribute \$1.7 million in cash and technology to

training Gulf Coast residents.