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Building bridges over the digital divide

SCI-TECH SCENE | With financial backing from Microsoft, Lumity is teaching skills and bringing computer training to Chicago nonprofits

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James Edwards wanted a promotion at his telemarketing job, so when he saw a sign for a computer-training program, he jotted down the number and ended up getting hired as a part-time computer instructor.

Edwards, 38, joined the program at the Chicago Commons Employment Training Center at the West Humboldt Education and Training Center at 3441 W. Chicago.

"I was living in the area, but I had no knowledge of Chicago Commons," Edwards said. "It really was kind of like a faith walk for me."

Edwards gained Computing Core Certification, called IC3, after six months of training, and he intends to continue working toward more specialized computer certification.

He was hired as a part-time instructor by Chicago-based Lumity (www.lumity.org), formerly called the IT Resource Center, a nonprofit that runs the Chicago Commons computer program and helps other nonprofits run more efficiently and with greater financial and technological savvy.

Edwards' goal is to obtain specialized certification so he can repair computers.

"IC3 presents endless opportunities," said Edwards, who has worked as a community educator, a public health educator and a Milwaukee County Zoo urban youth specialist. "It was rigorous and challenging. In the end, it encouraged me to think outside of my individual box."

In the last five years, Microsoft has given and matched employee gifts totaling more than \$85.9 million in cash, curriculum and software to nonprofits throughout Illinois that help people in underserved neighborhoods gain workplace skills.

Lumity has received and distributed \$429,000 in Microsoft donations, primarily of software, in the past three years. Lumity supports 20 technology centers, and is pairing the centers with local libraries to increase access to its Digital Literacy 2010 program. The number of paired centers and libraries is planned to reach 25 in the next two years.

"Our focus is to help people find meaningful jobs and to improve community development, and especially economic development," said Lumity Executive Director Richard Kurtz.

The work is particularly critical in today's economy, with unemployment rising and the global financial crisis continuing unabated.

Microsoft's donations account for 3 percent to 4 percent of Lumity's yearly \$1.7 million budget. The rest comes from foundations, individuals, earned revenue, government grants and other technology companies such as SAP and Accenture.

Shelley Stern, Microsoft's citizenship director for the Central Region that comprises Illinois, Indiana and 16 other states, said the software giant's goal is getting people ready for the workforce by teaching them 21st century skills.

Stern formerly served on and chaired the board of Lumity when it was the IT Resource

Center. Stern, formerly a sales vice president and general manager of AT&T's Chicago offices, recruited Microsoft's general manager to serve on Lumity's board.

"I managed a quarter of a billion dollar revenue stream [as sales vice president for global accounts at AT&T], and I slept with a pager under my pillow," she said.

She retired from AT&T six years ago after a 28-year career.

Stern's latest goal is to reach nonprofits that serve families, including those that host faith-based and after-school programs, and who have the resources to teach Microsoft's curriculum.

Microsoft offers its digital literacy curriculum free for download at www.microsoft.com/About/CorporateCitizenship/CommunityInvestment/NGO/en/us/trainingCertification.aspx.

Joy Robinson, director of the digital media center at the Illinois Institute of Technology, said the digital divide remains an important issue to Microsoft and other technology companies.

"Even simple things like applying for jobs have gone digital, so it makes sense to ensure that people have basic building-block knowledge of using computers," Robinson said.

Said Stern, "We want to accelerate the reach. My personal soapbox is that economic sustainability has a higher chance of success if all members of a family have digital literacy skills."