

# BOUND TO TRANSFORM.

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Byline: Karen McCowan The Register-Guard

Thanks to Eugene's NextStep electronics recycling program, nearly 3,500 poor Guatemalan children have gained computer access in the past six years.

That's the firsthand report from Maria Antonieta Ixcoteyac Vel[sz]squez, who directs a NextStep partner organization in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala. Vel[sz]squez is in Eugene this week, telling NextStep employees and volunteers how their work is changing lives in one of the poorest regions of the world.

"The development of a country is proportionate to the development of each of its inhabitants," Velasquez told a group Monday night that also included Eugene Mayor Kitty Piercy.

Velasquez, a social worker, co-founded INEPAS (the Spanish acronym for the Institute of Spanish Language and Social Aid Programs) in 1994. The agency uses proceeds from its Spanish immersion language program for visiting adults to improve educational opportunities for children and teenagers in rural Guatemala.

Her visit also has included a tour of NextStep's donation center and refurbishing operations at 2101 W. 10th Ave., where agency workers on Tuesday loaded 300 computer systems, 30 laser printers and additional support hardware into a shipping container bound for Quetzaltenango.

NextStep places 70 percent of its refurbished computers locally, Executive Director Lorraine Kerwood said. But it works with Partners in Solidarity to place the other 30 percent of renovated machines in disadvantaged areas worldwide.

The aim, Kerwood said, is to bridge the digital divide separating the computer "haves" and "have-nots" in the electronic age.

She said she invited Vel[sz]squez to Eugene after traveling to Quetzaltenango in January with members of NextStep's board and visiting several schools using the donated machines.

"It is amazing the impact access to technology is having on the children," Kerwood said. "Not only are they being exposed to the English language, but they are also learning Spanish, which is the national language, and Maya-K'ich, the language spoken in their homes."

Michael Day, a NextStep computer technician, said most of the machines sent to Guatemala have Pentium 3 or Pentium 4 processors.

"They are still very usable, especially if you feed them more memory," he said.

Many of the computers are the same model, because NextStep often receives "huge quantities" of the same machine from business donors.

"We may get 60 or 70 of the same computers at one time when, say, a large bank gets rid of its computers on a three-year scheduled replacement cycle," Day said. NextStep also ships down boxes of spare parts and has given INEPAS employees some basic training in maintenance and repair, he said.

Vel[sz]squez said her agency then works with parents at each rural school where it establishes a lab.

"In each community, parents organize themselves to provide maintenance and security," she said.

The next step, she added, is for INEPAS to help bring Internet connections to the remote locations.

NextStep hopes to fund such connections in at least two Quetzaltenango schools in the coming year, spokeswoman Melissa Erb said Tuesday.

Guatemala is the least-developed country in Central America, according to a 2002 World Bank Report. More than half of its residents live in poverty and 17 percent live in extreme poverty, most of them in rural areas such as the state of Quetzaltenango. Guatemala's childhood malnutrition rates are among the world's highest, with 44 percent of children under 5 suffering from stunted growth.

According to the country's Ministry of Education, less than 1 percent of public schools in Quetzaltenango have computer labs, though computer literacy is a prerequisite for many jobs and for university study.

Vel[sz]squez thanked the local group for bringing her to Eugene.

"I am happy to see rivers with such clear water," she said in remarks translated by Eugene Spanish teacher Beatriz Loper. "In my country, we don't have such a thing. They are contaminated."

Piercy praised the collaboration between the Eugene and Quetzaltenango agencies.

"In this world where so often we're talking about how we don't get along, these kind of relationships are so important," she said.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

On the Web, go to [www.inepas.org](http://www.inepas.org) or [www.nextsteprecycling.org](http://www.nextsteprecycling.org)

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