We Will Never Forget…

*A Report on the Wilderness Technology Alliance’s Response to the 2020 COVID-19 Pandemic*

January 30th, 2021

2020 is a year we will never forget, for so many reasons. We offer our deepest condolences for those who lost loved ones from COVID and the effects of COVID. Also to those who lost their jobs or are struggling to make ends meet in this crazy new world. On March 21st, 2020 the WTA celebrated its 20th anniversary, and for the first time in our history, the Digital Divide was recognized as an urgent global priority. It’s hard to believe that just one year ago, many Americans believed that the Digital Divide had already been mended, and the need for access to affordable technology was a thing of the past. We learned in 2020 that not only were they wrong, but the lack of access to technology was preventing scores of low-income kids from attending school and even killing people by making it difficult to social distance.

Yet, the WTA did not begin our Pandemic engagement providing computers. On March 10th, 2020, WTA Executive Director Lou August was supporting his mother in a nursing home in Detroit who was recovering from a stroke. On that day, he was forced to leave the nursing home, as one of the first COVID cases in Michigan was discovered just two rooms away. It soon became clear that one of the largest nursing homes in Michigan had almost no masks, nor did most nursing homes in the DC region. Due to our 20 years of work in the technology sector in China, and with incredible support from WTA volunteer Yiping Pan, within hours we were sourcing KN-95 masks from China. In the end, we provided over 10,000 KN-95 masks to three nursing homes and one hospital in Michigan, and a large nursing home in Rockville, MD. Ultimately, only preserving life mattered, even if it took us away of our non-profit mission at the most critical time in our history. Yet once we did what we could, we also knew we had to quickly get back to our mission...

A WTA staff member Jordan Mirgon remembers delivering computers on March 13th, 2020 in Ward 8 of Washington DC, just as the Pandemic was unfolding. He recalls, “The streets were packed and low-income computer recipients were taking public transport to the distribution site – they had no other choice.” The immanent crisis suddenly became perfectly clear, “Schools were closing on March 16th and low-income students without computers and Internet at home would be left out. Worse yet, low income people would have great difficulty social distancing without a computer and their lives would be at risk.”

Compounding the problem, the supply chain for new laptop computers had been severely disrupted, with COVID striking China and closing their factories since early 2020. Suddenly, free and affordable refurbished computers became a critical humanitarian resource, and our phone starting ringing off the hook. So did email requests for computers. We started counting daily incoming email requests not by the email, but by the pages of emails. And these emails were not only from low-income individuals seeking affordable refurbished computers, which are normal for us, they were also from schools and even entire school districts, seeking computers because none were available from market sources. The WTA normally stocks about 200 used computers for refurbishing and placement. But on March 13th 2020, we had nearly 2000 in stock – more than any time in our organization’s 20 year history. It was an incredible coincidence – *but we like to think it was a miracle.*
The WTA needed lots of labor to refurbish almost 2000 laptops, as every laptop takes over an hour to refurbish. Yet, nearly the entire nation was sheltering at home. The word quickly got out and family, friends and COVID-fearless volunteers stepped up to provide the essential labor. A huge thanks to Andrew Tiry, Eric Salamone, Jordan Mignon, Chris David, Dylan Medina, John Dondapati, Matthew August, Giellen Medeiro, Raquel August, and especially Monique August. Work hours ran from 8am to 11pm, seven days a week, from March 14th through mid-June, and then long hours thereafter. But it was not work, it was therapy to be part of the solution. We also felt incredibly fortunate to be able to work when so many were unemployed, and to spend time with our children. Executive Director Lou August recalls, “I remember sometime in June being so worn out I decided to take a Saturday off. It probably took three hours for depression to start setting in, including thinking of my mother who was in a nursing home that was infected with COVID where eight people already died and no family member had seen her in three months. I had to get back to refurbishing computers, and in flash, peace and even joy returned. I felt so very, very blessed to be part of the solution.” (Sadly, Lou’s mother Elsie died in her nursing home in September)

We also needed to buy the missing hard drives, memory, power cords, software and more to refurbish nearly 2000 computers. In addition, we had to cover our operating costs when just about everyone was shut down. As a technology provider, the WTA was declared a “Critical Infrastructure Provider” and we were able to stay open. News of the crises was also getting out, and people who cared started taking action to provide financial support. The WTA is grateful to its many supporters, including Arcana Foundation, Share Fund, DC Government, and especially to Niki Mock. Niki is a videographer from Bethesda, MD, who had been donating bicycles to kids in Southeast DC. She understood the need for laptops by students in Southeast, but even more important, she took immediate action. By contacting her network of caring friends, she was rapidly able to raise money to cover much of the WTA’s costs to refurbish computers. She was then able to place those computers for free to needy youth in Southeast DC. We are deeply grateful to Niki and her generous network of friends and supporters for all they made possible.

Below is a list of a few of the organizations that received computers from the WTA for their low-income recipients since the pandemic stuck. In every case, they had champions who deeply care about kids and literally risked their lives to put WTA refurbished computers in the hands of low-income recipients at the height of the pandemic. They are the real heroes, and made our mission possible during the most compelling period in our organization’s 20 year history:

- 10 laptop computers to the Skyland Workforce Center
  – Thank you Anne-Marie Bairstow!
- 10 laptop computers to On-Ramps to Careers
  – Thank you John Capozzi and Robert Holm!
- 15 laptop computers to the Black Swan Academy
  – Thank you Samantha Davis!
- 20 laptop computers to the Capital Area Immigrant’s Rights
  – Thank you JeanPaul Figueroa!
• 26 laptop computers to Radio Free Asia
  – Thank you John Penovich!
• 40 laptop computers to Invisible Hand Foundation (DCPS)
  – Thank you Diana Romero!
• 40 laptop computers to Catholic Schools
  – Thank you Anthony Hunt and Marisa Stoolmiller!
• 50 desktop and laptop computers to CC Prep Academy
  Thank you Conchita Mays-Crawford!
• 50 laptop computers to the Latin American Youth Center (LAYC)
  Thank you Bernadette Kreh!
• 50+ laptops to students at Byte Back
  Thank you Martika Futrell and Elizabeth Lindsay!
• 65 laptop computers to Payne Elementary
  – Thank you Mark Jordan!
• 74 laptop computers to Baltimore City Schools
  – Thank you Chris David!
• 165 desktop computers to DC Public Schools
  – Thank you Megan Steckley!
• 180 laptops computers to DC SNAP (food stamp recipients) at Byte Back
  – Thank you Chrissie Powell!
• 200+ desktop and laptop computers for low-income individuals in the DMV
  – Thank you all!
• 250+ laptops to the Niki Mock project for students in Southeast DC Schools
  – Thank you Niki and the many supporters of the Niki Mock Project!

Below are a Few of the Pictures of the Recipients of Computers

Thank you Niki Mock for providing many of these pictures