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For Immediate Release

WIPP Computers Get New Life in Jal Schools

CARLSBAD, N.M., July 11, 2001 – When R.C. Griffin walks the hallways of Jal schools, he's greeted with smiles from teachers and students alike. Griffin, the computer technology coordinator for the Jal School District, is a popular man. He's a scavenger of sorts, and his hunting grounds are agencies such as the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE).

Griffin has a knack for finding uses for excess equipment such as old or broken computers and office supplies. "We're a poor school district," said Griffin. "But every classroom in the district has at least one computer. WIPP has saved us tens of thousands of dollars."

Half of the computers came from DOE's Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP) through its Gift Program. Ann Morissette, Property Team Leader for Westinghouse TRU Solutions LLC (the management and operating contractor for DOE at WIPP), administers the Gift Program. "R.C. takes everything. If a computer is broken, he'll teach the kids how to fix it, or he'll use the working parts to repair another computer," said Morissette.

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Computers waiting for a home or to be recycled are stored in an area affectionately called “the beach.” The cellar under the school has a soft dirt floor (like sand). Griffin and another teacher discovered the area when rewiring the high school to network the computers. Eventually all the computers at “the beach” will be used as teaching tools of some kind.

The gift program makes a huge difference for the small southeast New Mexico town with a population of 2,000. The Jal School District has an enrollment of 450 students. The 2001 high school graduating class had 52 students – one of the largest classes in recent memory.

The 37 schoolteachers in the district make creative use of donated materials. Used colored file folders become construction paper. An old viewgraph becomes a frame for a Mother’s Day picture and poem. Extra trashcans, white boards and tape dispensers are also hot items.

WIPP exceeded more than \$1.5 million worth of equipment and office supplies (416 pieces) in fiscal year 2001. Of that amount, Jal requested and received more than \$1.1 million worth (184 pieces).

Old WIPP computers can be found in almost every Jal classroom. “When I need the best computer I can get, it’s one of WIPP’s I use,” said Griffin. The high school yearbook is created on a donated WIPP computer.

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Junior high and high school students research topics on the Internet using WIPP donated computers, while elementary school students practice spelling on WIPP donated computers.

In the high school computer lab, students not only master basic word processing, but also learn design programs such as Adobe PhotoShop and create presentations with Microsoft PowerPoint.

A select group of students in the technical computer class build and repair computers. "They learn to put in things like hard drives and CD ROM's," said Griffin. "At the end of the school year, the final project is to put together a computer which they get to take home."

A personal computer is a treasure in Jal, where only 15 percent of the homes have one. About one-fifth of those computers were built in Griffin's classroom.

With the skills learned in the computer lab, students can leave high school and go straight to work with a marketable skill. Those who choose to go to college can get office jobs to help with expenses.

Griffin also established one evening a week when the computer lab is open to the community. Most of the users are students; but at least one adult comes each week.

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“Visiting classrooms and talking to R.C. makes me realize how much farther behind kids in these small towns would be without programs like ours,” said Morissette. “It’s really important that people who work on the WIPP project know their excessed equipment goes to good use and how hard the personnel in the property department work to make the program a success.”

The most recent gift to Jal was made in May. Two laptops, four personal computers, two monitors, two printers, and a stack of office supplies richer, Griffin ended the school year. He’s headed to “the beach” now, to get ready for fall.