

## WILLIAM REED:

# Using Technology to Find Lost Loved Ones

Dr. William Reed works with *Technology for All*, which began in 1997 with the goal of using technology as a tool to empower low income communities. They did this by establishing community technology centers that provide access to computers and the internet. Jenna Berger, former managing editor of *Houston History*, interviewed Dr. Reed on January 13, 2006.



*Technology for All set up 210 computers on the Reliant Center property to help evacuees locate lost loved ones.*

All photos courtesy of Mark Sloan.

**JENNA BERGER (JB):** How did you first become involved in helping with Katrina?

**WILLIAM REED (WR):** I was having breakfast with Elliott Gershenson with Interfaith Ministries . . . before folks began arriving. . . . [We] quickly discovered, through multiple websites, that there were large numbers of evacuees that did not know where other family members were, [and] . . . that one of the things that we could do . . . would be to provide public access with computers to the evacuees at the Dome. . . . By Friday night, less than twenty-four hours after the evacuees first began arriving, . . . we had set up initially a forty-station computer lab down in the theater of the Astrodome.

One of our staff members is a former SBC [Communications] employee. He called SBC. SBC put forty DSL lines into

the facility by Friday night. We called Compucycle . . . a for-profit computer recycling company. They came up with the forty initial computers. We called Sim Houston . . . plus HP let us use laptops. . . . By the end of the week, we had 210 computers in several locations on the Reliant Center property. . . .

We didn't have any [prior] official relationship [with the different organizations] . . . As evacuees would come into what we called the ACT Center, the Astrodome Community Technology Center, we discovered several things very quickly: 1) the evacuees had limited technology skills; 2) many of the evacuees had limited literacy skills; 3) they were distraught; and 4) they had been traumatized in many cases by the experience. Our initial efforts, we thought, would require maybe fifteen volunteers for the 200+ computers. Eventually, we ended up having almost one volunteer for every evacuee that walked in the door. . . .

The biggest challenge was also that you had a population that was both traumatized and, in many cases, had limited literacy both in terms of basic literacy and computer literacy. Yet, all the FEMA applications, housing information, all of that was being disseminated appropriately through websites. People had to have an email address to get a response from FEMA on their application to FEMA. Ninety-nine percent of those folks didn't have an email address, didn't understand email, didn't understand you had to have a user name and a password, and if you have it, don't lose it because you can't get your email. . . . All those different resources and things that we were doing with folks was getting them up to speed in terms of computer literacy and basic literacy to access the tools and resources that they need in this crisis. . . .

A lot of evacuees would come into the center looking for a loved one and, as a part of that process, would tell their story. . . . We put together a training manual on-the-fly there at the Dome to train volunteers in what they needed to do [stressing] . . . the importance of listening and helping people; if they wanted to tell their story, feel comfortable that they could tell their story . . .

One of the problems . . . was that you had all these organizations, corporations, websites, etc., that were trying to help people find each other. At one point, we identified fifty-six different websites for people . . . look[ing] for one another. The only problem with that is [people] are not going to find each other because [they] are looking in different places. . . . David Philo,



*Even with the computer services, finding loved ones was difficult. Technology for All continued to work with evacuees in Houston after the shelters were closed.*

the president of Yahoo! [and] a Tulane University graduate, personally took on the effort with Yahoo! employees to access the information from all those sites. Yahoo! created a web crawler that [when] you put somebody's name in, it crawls all of those sites to look for a hit. . . .

We discovered that a lot of folks who are older required reading glasses. Many had lost their reading glasses in the chaos. . . . One [Yahoo! volunteer] was working with this man who was looking for his brother. She discovered he couldn't see the screen. . . . I happened to have my own pair of reading glasses . . . and said, "Here, use mine." In the course of being able to read the screen, he discovered where his brother was, and they were able to make a phone call. I actually had written about that experience in my blog, and then the next day, we had lots of glasses show up. . . .

**JB:** I read about the young man who came into the center and now he is working for you.

**WR:** Joshua Cousin. Joshua wrote his own blog in the center, and he is out now working as a computer lab assistant at South Union Community Development Corporation. . . . In New Orleans, [he] lived in a very difficult situation in a neighborhood where he said, "I chose to stay inside because of the crime outside." In fact, [he] talked about people being murdered in the neighborhood. . . . Inside, he learned how to use the computer, and then once his house was flooded and he came to Houston, he discovered the ACT Center. We kept seeing him in there every day, and he said, no, he didn't need any help. Finally [we] discovered what he was doing.

**JB:** Have you kept progress reports on the individuals that you helped?

**WR:** A number of the volunteers have done that. . . . A lot of personal relationships were developed in those one-on-one conversations in front of the computer looking for a lost loved one, or helping someone fill out a FEMA application, or trying to figure out a way to get one's husband who is in Austin to Houston so that a couple can reconnect.

[When] Rita was getting ready to come to town . . . the decision was made to move the folks that were still there [Reliant] to other locations . . . We all packed up and left in a matter of hours that morning. It was a day of mixed emotions.

**JB:** At what point did you decide to continue helping the evacuees?

**WR:** It was pretty quick. We established . . . the Community Technology 2.0 Project, which is focused on building the capacity of community technology centers (CTCs) that are serving neighborhoods with the largest number of evacuees. . . . The new residents from New Orleans had placed a burden on social service agencies and organizations that work with folks, and we felt like with our skills and expertise, our role ought to be to increase the capacity of those organizations. . . . We are . . . helping CTCs [with] how to take a person who doesn't have any [computer literacy] skills . . . [learn to] live in today's world. . . .

**JB:** What do you think are most important things to remember in the future?

**WR:** One of the things is you have to move quickly when there is a disaster. Another thing is you have to be willing to work with people that perhaps you have never worked with before, and you have to be willing to set aside differences and put the needs of the evacuees, or those affected by the disaster first, and let those needs . . . determine what it is that you do. That is a critical piece. . . . If you see a need and you see . . . your organization can address [it], then do it. Don't wait for permission, just do it. 🌀



*Volunteers helped Houston's "guest citizens" search for their lost loved ones.*