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Old electronics provide new work in Sunrise

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'It makes me feel independent,' Maria Agro says of her work at the Achievement and Rehabilitation Center in Sunrise.

If you've recently thrown out some sort of gizmo, have you ever wondered where it goes?

It lands in a warehouse at the edge of Sunrise, where tossed-out televisions and computers stack up like towers. Maria Agro, a 44-year-old woman with small hands and thick bifocals, picks one up and starts prying the sprockets. She tosses them into a box where LaToya Reynolds will pick them up. Or Eduardo Fabian might try to refurbish them. Or they might be touched by the hands of the dozen or so special-needs adults responsible for recycling and refurbishing nearly all of the county's discarded electronics.

— This week in Washington, D.C., elected officials are debating a climate change bill. There'll be lots of talk about cap-and-trade and inconvenient truths and capital footprints. More than 1,000 miles away, at the Achievement and Rehabilitation Center off Commercial Boulevard, are the quiet foot-soldiers of the green movement.

For more than half a century, the nonprofit organization has worked with people who have Down Syndrome, autism or another disability. They cater to more than 1,000 disabled children and adults -- giving them the chance to receive job training, play basketball, take trips, make friends.

Most of them aren't allowed to live or drive on their own. Their passion for recycling is based

on something simpler and more personal than healing the world.

When Agro places items inside her box, she's really placing herself out of one.

“It makes me feel independent,” she says.

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The computer crunching began in 2001, when ARC won Broward's first contract to do its electronics recycling.

At first, the center devoted 1,000 square feet to the recycling program. That's grown to 12,000 feet.

The added space has helped them deal with the exponential increase in electronics recycling. In two years, the number of people who recycle their electronics in Broward has gone from about 9,000 to 19,000, county statistics show. By year's end, numbers will climb even more because many people have thrown out their televisions after this winter's conversion to digital TV.

This is good news for Peter Foye, who directs Broward's recycling program.

If they're not recycled, the machines will end up in a landfill, where lead and other contaminants could leak and slide into drinking water. But as the public's concern about the state of the earth grows, more people are choosing to drop their electronics at a local site, where the center's workers pick them up.

“There is more awareness of the program and of the need to be more conscious about the material we throw away,” Foye said.

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Like her colleagues, Agro works three days a week, five hours a day. She wakes at 6 a.m., fixes herself breakfast and gets picked up by a group van that drives her to the center. There, she stuffs her small hands in gloves that are too big.

“This place is really nifty,” she said. “I earn my own money, I have friends, I found a boyfriend. His name's Frank.”

She sits at a station. Signs around her remind her to ask for help and to never take the gloves off. She carries a spiral notebook and opens a page to “Maria's Work Day.” She

pulls the sprocket, then puts down a stray mark. One down.

“I want to make sure everyone knows what work is mine,” she says.

Tupac Shakur raps softly from the speakers. Behind her, 27-year-old LaToya Reynolds is hauling a crane and a deep box full of electronics. She gathers up the unused parts and wires, which will be taken to another location so they can be shredded.

Eduardo Fabian, 34, picks up the processors. He searches for the hard drive for corrosion. Then, he'll clear its memory and restore it with Windows XP.

The process of restoring a computer takes almost two hours, but he says he never gets bored. It's the only job he's ever wanted to do. It's the only job he really feels comfortable doing.

“Computers have always been what I've been good at,” Fabian says. “I've been working with them since I was 17.”

The workers do four weeks of training before they start. And its repetitive work -- pull, crank, toss, wait -- that bodes well for their abilities.

Racquel Henry is their supervisor. In her three years overseeing the staff, she has never seen anything worse happen to one of her them than getting a deep cut.

On this day, she has just returned from a recycling conference that brought in companies from all over the country. Many were nonprofits; none used people with adult disabilities.

While she understands their contributions to the globe, she mostly sees their self-esteem and independence increase.

“It is amazing to see where they are coming from,” Henry said. “I asked one woman what she did with the money and she said she just saved it in her pocket book.

I had to tell her, ‘No, you should open up an account.’ And in a few weeks, she was so happy to tell me she had her own bank card.”

The center itself also benefits from the arrangement. Broward County just signed a \$3 million contract for the center to continue this work for another five years. And while the center donates some computers to charity, they also resell refurbished processors and laptops, starting at \$175.

Then, there are the contracts with companies that want the center to handle their recycled electronics directly. With funding in the nonprofit world shrinking, the quirky project that started eight years ago is now helping the center weather the recession.

Little of that matters to Agro. What does matter is her one luxury: When she gets her paycheck, she calls her sister-in-law and invites her to lunch.

They dine at Sweet Tomatoes, where Agro will fix herself a big salad. And then, she'll pick up the tab.

The rest of the money goes to her savings fund. Ultimately, she wants to leave this place. She knows the stereotypes of a person with special needs. She's been mocked and underestimated all her life. So she wants to do something big.

"I want to go to college to be a pharmacist, or a scientist or a businesswoman," she says. "I'll do it on the weekends, so I can make money here to pay for classes. I can do it. All I have to do is think positive, close my eyes and dream."

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