

# Computers 4 U

## Group takes used computers and gets 'em where they're wanted

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**NELIA RAPOSO**

Nineteen-year-old Dane Osbourne's brother Jermaine, 20, was shot several times in the back as he headed to a downtown Toronto park near Lower Jarvis St. and Front St. E around lunchtime, last June.

The Regent Park resident died weeks later. But not before his girlfriend gave birth to their daughter, Janiah, in the same hospital.

So far, there have been no arrests.

"This summer was my worst year ever – flat out. This happened during my exams so I didn't even get to do them," Dane Osbourne says. "I'm still having nightmares."

These circumstances ripple through the music he's producing with a group of friends under the stage name Blackline.

What's making all those efforts possible is that he's working with a computer from Sky's the Limit Youth organization, started by Lara Tavares three years ago.

Sky's the Limit is a charity that works with other agencies, primarily getting refurbished computers to Regent Park-area students who need them.

If you're growing up without access to a computer, the obstacles are huge. Consider that nearly 70 per cent of Canadians use the Internet to communicate and do research, according to Statistics Canada.

"The computer that she gave me is upgraded so I can make mixed cds," Dane says. "I'm always on the computer – got my microphone out and everything."

Being well-connected herself, Tavares also hooked Osbourne up with a list of local music producers.

Tracks like "Back in the Dayz" and "War in the Streets" are a few poignant reminders of the trauma and grief Osbourne's family endures. The music on a 24-track cd called *Blackout* is a hip hop, rap and R&B tribute to J-9, a nickname of Osbourne's brother.

"This music is helping me to heal a little, slowly, by putting my feelings out there," he says.



Lara Tavares grew up in a home where having a computer was no big deal.

"I had a computer in my home before a lot of my friends did. My dad constantly reminded us how fortunate we were," says Tavares, 35, whose father worked in the technology sector as she grew up in Kanata, Ont.

She realizes that her university-educated parents equipped her to believe: "I can do anything I want to do.

"That's the message that I try to impart to all these students."

As a first-generation Canadian of Caribbean descent, Tavares feels a responsibility to be a role model.

That's why she quit her decade-long career in graphics and Web design to do this.

"I want them to see this is what success looks like, you can do this too if you just apply yourself. It's a pay-it-forward mentality," she says.

"It's the most practical way for me. You know that somewhere someone is going to be using that computer to do homework."

When she started the group three years ago, the goal was to get 100 computers to 100 high school students. But that number has risen to 320 computers to date.

That's not all the group does. Sky's the Limit raises funds to purchase refurbished computers, it provides refurbished computers to students from under-resourced communities and has a mentoring and tutoring program to get the students up and running.

While the group's primary mission is to get computers into homes, some computers have been donated to places that help disadvantaged teens such as a Burke's Bookstore on St. Clair Ave. W. and the St. Lawrence Community Health Centre on the Esplanade.

"It's a double whammy: You are supporting kids but you are also keeping computers out of landfills," Tavares says.

To get a Sky's the Limit computer, the student must be registered in Pathways to Education, a community program that encourages students to stay in school by providing a place where they can come for weekly tutoring.

In partnering with Pathways, Tavares says she is better able to figure out which students are in need of a personal computer the most.

Students must also attend high school and get the necessary onsite training in computer assembly and software usage.

Sometimes a recipient will literally pick up the computer at Pathways with a wagon or a couple of friends will help carry it home in parts. But often a Sky's the Limit volunteer will drop it off, Tavares says.

If for some reason the computer conks out before the student is done high school, the group replaces it. But generally this doesn't happen.

"They take fantastic care of their machines," Tavares says.

Tavares has also teamed up with Reboot Canada, another non-profit organization, that gives out tax receipts for old computers and printers. What they can't use, they send to a certified recycler. Sky's the Limit pays about \$200 for each computer.

"People think they need the newest equipment – but then they take it home and use it only for email," says Rich Roxborough, executive director at Reboot.

E-waste is becoming a major problem, as it contains toxic materials like lead and mercury.

Thinking back to first impressions of Tavares, Roxborough says, "she started out pretty small, buying the computers herself. We were impressed by her drive and it's just growing more and more.

"We are loving it."

The number of computers Sky's the Limit places is about to grow as Tavares moves forward with a plan to spread out from Regent Park and target some cities across Canada after an information technology company named the group its chosen charity.

IT company CNC Global has already given Sky's the Limit \$25,000. It's a significant chunk of cash that is almost double the \$13,696 in the organization's account in 2005, according to the registered charity's information listed on Canada Revenue Agency's website.

Tonight Tavares is volunteering as a tutor, as she does every week, for Pathways to Education. She's sitting in a computer lab in the basement of a building near Dundas St. E. and Parliament Ave., provided by Yonge Street Mission.

Around here, most families bring in less than \$20,000, according to statistics compiled by the City of Toronto. The same stats say almost 80 per cent of people in the community are a visible minority.

If there were windows down here you'd be able to see Regent Park high rises across the street, part of Canada's oldest public housing project.

And if you look close at those buildings, popping up in a couple of spots, you'll see the glow of computer screens.

## **How it works**

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**Sky's the Limit Youth Organization** works to get refurbished computers into the homes of teenagers from under-resourced communities. To date, the group has donated 320

refurbished computers, with the help of 20 regular volunteers, doing everything from selling raffle tickets to delivering computers.

To get a computer, the recipient must be registered in **Pathways to Education** (a tutoring/mentoring program designed for young people from poor communities), attend high school and get the necessary onsite training in computer assembly and software usage. They are also taught basic Internet safety.

What applicants can get: a Pentium 3 – with 933 MHz, 256 RAM, 20 GB Hard Drive, Windows 2000 OS, Microsoft Office 2000 Premium.

The computers come from **Reboot Canada**, a non-profit established in 1995 to reuse and recycle computers by providing them to charitable groups, thereby reducing e-waste.

Sky's the Limit pays about \$200 for each computer.

A lot of teenagers who get computers don't have Internet or a printer at home so they still depend on computer labs in the community.

#### **WebSites**

- » [stlonline.org](http://stlonline.org)
- » <http://pathwaystoeducation.ca/>
- » [rebootcanada.ca](http://rebootcanada.ca)

For more on Dane Osbourne's music, see [www.myspace.com/blacklinemusic](http://www.myspace.com/blacklinemusic).

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