

Columbia Basin Herald, WA

February 25, 2004

Boys & Girls Club awarded technology grant: Three Columbia Basin clubs receive Toshiba computers

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"Follow-you Fiona" and "Potty-mouth Pete" are character-types children and adults alike would be wise to avoid on the Internet.

Fortunately, area youth who use the computer labs provided by the Columbia Basin-area Boys & Girls clubs are well acquainted with Fiona and Pete featured in the computer-interactive program Netsmartz, which teaches Internet safety.

An added bonus, however, is that Netsmartz can be taught more efficiently to more kids now that area clubs have three brand-new computer labs, courtesy of a technology grant awarded by The Beaumont Foundation of America.

"It is so nice," Program Coordinator Jenni Mickle said. "It's amazing...This has taken us to a whole new level. The computers are more advanced."

The Beaumont Foundation is an organization formed with the unclaimed funds of a class-action lawsuit. One of the foundation's goals is to provide uniform computer and technology access to a variety of school groups, community centers, homes and hospitals across the country.

The computer lab package sounds like a wish list of a lifetime. The labs arrived complete with 10 wireless laptops, four digital cameras, one projector and one printer. In addition, the computers came downloaded with the complete list of programs taught by Boys & Girls clubs nationwide. Even Netsmartz, which has been offered for the past three to four years by the club.

The area clubs practice what they preach on Internet safety. Every child that visits the clubs has access to the computer lab and the lab is monitored at all times.

Mickle said she introduced 12 kids to the Netsmartz program last week. She is appreciative of the new equipment, having struggled with outdated and unreliable computers throughout the years.

The Beaumont Foundation donated computer equipment to 1,800 Boys & Girls clubs nationwide. In the Columbia Basin, the downtown and Larson Heights clubs now have the new equipment, as well as the Othello clubhouse.

But the foundation does have its expectations. In the first three months, Mickle and the other site coordinators must have a certain number of programs running. Finally, each club must have all of the required programs operating in full swing.

"The foundation is big on kids having hands-on experience," Mickle said. "It's unbelievable the amount of responsibility coming with the lab."

Each site coordinator attended technology training in Seattle, where they received an overview of the programs they will eventually teach. A goal of the

Columbia Basin clubs is to keep up to speed by attending technology conferences annually, Mickle said.

On a day-to-day basis, Mickle has watched how fast the kids learn basic computer skills. After a few sessions, some of the 5-year-olds who had little to no computer skills were able to shut down a program, turn the machine on and off and even use a mouse.

On another note, though, the local clubs are working to reinforce and enhance current school technology programs with the material offered at the clubs, explained Boys & Girls Club Director Ryan Graves.

Graves called the recent award the greatest organizational donation the area clubs had ever seen. With the new equipment, there is an opportunity to take the technology to the next level.

In the future, Graves hopes to link up all three of the area clubs. Kids could have pen pals and the more isolated members would benefit from that interaction, Graves added.