



COVER STORY

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As the youngest person ever to take a non-dot-com public, ice cream entrepreneur Jeremy Kraus (W'98) won't be satisfied with just ice cream, and neither will his partner Sam Cohen (W'98).

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May 18, 2000

ENGINEERING/Tech missionaries hook up India, Ecuador and Mali.

A bridge across the digital divide

BY LIBBY ROSOF

The first computer lab in a public school in Ecuador went up last spring. Next month, in Pune, India, a place where electricity works only some of the time, another new computer lab will go up.

The builders are Puente (bridge in Spanish), a group of volunteer students who are bridging the digital divide between the haves and have-nots, spanning Philadelphia city streets, oceans and continents.

The trip from mere volunteering to opening the Internet to those with no access grew out of a contact between a SEAS student volunteering in the community and a Philadelphia public school teacher named Edison Freire and Joseph Sun, director of academic affairs at SEAS.

The student connected Freire to Sun, and the two discovered they had a lot in common. "He and I share a common vision," said Sun. Both want to bring technology to places no bit or byte has ever bitten before.

That's how the plan for Penn students to connect a school in Quito with one in University City, using computers rebuilt by North Philadelphia public school students in a program run by Freire, happened.

First, Puente built a 10-computer lab at the University City New School (UCNS). Then, with students and teachers from UCNS and with 10 more nearly new computers recycled by Freire's Urban Technology Program, Puente built a lab in Quito.

The delegation showed teachers how to use the lab as a learning

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tool, and showed university students how to keep the lab running.

The students at UCNS, assigned by their teachers to study Ecuador as their theme this year, have kept up a steady stream of questions for the students at Escuela Fiscal Zoila Ugarte de Landivar (ZUL). The computers have helped the youngsters bridge economic, language, cultural, technological and spatial barriers.

The ZUL kids, who had zero experience with computers, were suddenly in touch with a whole new world. "It kind of gave me a new outlook," said Rohan Amin (EAS'02) of his Puente experience in Ecuador. "I understand the digital divide more — because I actually saw it, experienced it first hand. At first they [the children] can't even begin to understand or use it. It was like opening a door for them. It was really cool."

So cool that Amin and Puente are off to Pune to build a 40-computer lab in a community center to prepare adults for computer-based jobs — adults too poor to pay for classes.

But first Puente had to raise money, deal with government officials in India and plan the installation.

"They worked so hard," Sun said. "They are designing the whole lab and have been working with key people in India to put the project together." They have raised money from technology giants and small tech outfits. "A New Hope businessman, Dennis Mehta of EcomXML, will work to set up a Puente trust fund so we can build these labs anywhere — 20 more in India and then build them all over the world."

Puente thinks big. It builds long-term maintenance of the lab into each project. And it's planning an on-line network for international chats among Puente labs around the world.

But the Puente story is only a part of SEAS' plan to wire the world for the Internet. For instance, a class of 25 students is off to Mali this summer to build a lab in Bamako.

"There's a bigger story here," said Sun.

