

## **Improving lives with technology**

UNCC students help new owners of Habitat homes connect to the Internet.

By David Perlmutter [dperlmutter@charlotteobserver.com](mailto:dperlmutter@charlotteobserver.com)

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They're a bridge to the digital divide.

Since December, students and staff from UNC Charlotte's College of Computing and Informatics have partnered with Habitat Charlotte to hook up new Habitat for Humanity homeowners to the wonders of the Internet.

On a recent Saturday, a half-dozen students installed computers donated by Dell in a half-dozen more Habitat homes, bringing the total to about 30 homes in the Charlotte area since Dec. 1.

Graduate student Evie Powell is a repeat volunteer.

"Everyone always seems extremely grateful," said Powell, a second-year computer science doctoral student from Charlotte. "For a lot of them, this program is the only way they're able to get a computer and connect to the Internet.

"We don't buy the computers, and we're not connected to Habitat. But these people identify us with both and are so happy to see us. It's very rewarding; we're getting the better end of the deal."

The installations are part of a program by the AT&T Foundation and the nonprofit One Economy to improve the lives of low-income families through technology.

UNCC's role in the program will run into December.

"It's heartwarming to know that something as simple as installing a computer and providing access to the Internet can really change a person's life," said college spokesman Clark Curtis.

Habitat Charlotte head Bert Green said the computers will help Habitat children with school. "I think we can expect to see better grades in Habitat homes because of this extraordinary community partnership," he said.

After the computers are hooked up, the students don't leave without giving homeowners a basic lesson on accessing cyberspace.

Some homeowners are brought to campus for more extensive training. In March, the students had to install computers in several homes owned by Vietnamese families. They hunted down a translator to help in the installations and the subsequent class on campus.

Powell, who designs educational computer games, was able to use her rudimentary Spanish as she installed a computer for a woman who spoke little English.

"It's nice to be able to help people," she said. "We sit in front of computers all day, programming. We don't interact too much with people from the outside. This gives us that opportunity and put our knowledge to work."