

# Old computers given new life in Kenya

By Nelly Edmondson Gupta

When Jude Ndambuki was growing up in Kenya he often went to bed hungry. His mother, a widowed peasant farmer with eight children, had little food and less money; often the family didn't even get one full meal a day. But Ndambuki, now a chemistry teacher at the Master's School in Dobbs Ferry, had something to hang onto.

"When my father was dying, his last words to me were 'Please continue your education,'" said Ndambuki during a recent interview with the Enterprise. "And any time I was hungry or lacked kerosene and had to study by moonlight, his words kept me going."

Ndambuki's hard work paid off. After attending college in Nairobi on a full scholarship, he became a teacher and eventually a headmaster. In 1995 he came to the U.S. and got a job at the Master's School. One month later, was able to bring his wife, Bernadette, and their children, David, now 12, and Mary, 9, here to join him.

Ndambuki, 40, who lives on campus with his family, says he feels "very much at home" in America. But he also remains strongly connected to Kenya, a country of 30 million residents, 20 million of whom are poor. Ndambuki sends money back to his family, visits regularly to help his mother on the farm, and, more recently, has begun a project that he hopes will provide many young Kenyans with marketable skills.

## Computers for Kenya

Starting in 2001, Ndambuki and a couple of his friends began collecting old computers with the idea of sending them to schools in Kenya. As more and more computers came in, Ndambuki grew increasingly excited. "I started to take this project seriously because I thought it could actually work," he said.

In 2001, they sent 25 computers to Kenya, in 2002-2003 they sent 65, and this year they've already collected 70 — and it's only April.



ANNE MARIE LEONE/RIVERTOWN'S ENTERPRISE

Jude Ndambuki fixes up some of the computers donated to his cause

Although many of the computers are donated singly, sometimes Ndambuki receives a windfall. When the Rippowam Cisqua School in Bedford, NY upgraded their computer

facilities in January, they gave Ndambuki 24 they needed to get rid of. "By good luck, they knew that I'm collecting," he said with a grin.

# Ndambuki

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Even though shipping is expensive — it costs \$4,000 to send 70 computers by sea, which is the cheapest route — it's still much cheaper for schools to obtain the computers this way than to buy them. "A computer that costs \$300 here would cost more than \$500 in Kenya; only a few people even sell computers there," Ndambuki explained.

At Master's, Ndambuki and the school's technology director, along with some of the students, work on the computers and ready them for shipping. "I ask for PCs with Windows 95 or later, and Apple PowerMac G3 and later," he said. "They must be in working order."

He also accepts separate monitors and keyboards.

Ndambuki stores some of the comput-

ers in his office at the school, some in one of the dormitories, and some in his apartment. "My house is very full now," he laughed. "I want to ship them as soon as I can!"

To raise money for shipping costs, Ndambuki's fellow teachers and some of the students help out by fundraising. Right now, they are selling candy.

To determine where to send the computers, Ndambuki taps into his extensive list of contacts. Because he worked as an educator in Kenya, Ndambuki knows many teachers and heads of schools there. "Mostly we send the computers through the Education Office in Kenya," he said. "The government distributes them — they get the computers to a central place and invite schools to come and collect them."

Generally, each primary or secondary school gets four computers, and once they are set up, they are quickly put to use.

Teachers train on them. Then they in turn teach students how to use them. In addition, says Ndambuki, "We have encouraged schools to invite villagers to come and learn how to use the computer and the Internet."

Ndambuki hopes that by exposing young Kenyans to computers, they will learn skills that will enable them to get non-farm work.

"The jobs that are coming now require people to know technology," he said. "Office jobs — general office work and data entry. Without this program most kids come from poor families will not have that skill. But with the knowledge of technology they will be able to be absorbed by the economy much easier."

## 50 seedlings per computer

As payback, each school is asked to plant 50 seedlings for every computer it

receives. This, Ndambuki explains, is a way of conserving the environment.

"We decided to make this a motivating factor," he said. "Kenya mostly depends on firewood for construction and as a result there is lot of deforestation. "Computers can be a hazard to the environment: they are made of metals that are not environmentally friendly, and when they get broken, they are dumped somewhere."

Planting the seedlings, then, is a way of replenishing and "giving back" to the environment. "We should recycle computers as much as possible rather than dumping them," Ndambuki stressed.

Anyone who has one or more computers or computer components to donate can contact Ndambuki by calling him at 674-4211 or sending him an e-mail at [ndambuki@hotmail.com](mailto:ndambuki@hotmail.com)