
Computer Project at Western Carolina Center Library

Bird R. Williams

Western Carolina Center is a regional mental retardation facility operating as a part of the Division of Mental Health, Mental Retardation and Substance Abuse, within the North Carolina Department of Human Resources. The center serves the western 35 counties of North Carolina as part of the State's developing system of habilitation for the mentally retarded. Western Carolina Center operates on the premise that its residents enjoy the same rights of citizenship as does every other citizen of the state and of the United States.

The mission of the facility is to provide residential treatment and care for those mentally retarded persons in need of the same who are unable to receive appropriate services within the community. The goal is time limited so as to protect the resident from unnecessarily prolonged institutionalization and in order to enhance his early return to the community. Thus the facility strives to be a "therapeutic detour" rather than a dead-end street.

A restatement of the philosophy of Western Carolina Center by Dr. Iverson Riddle, director, dated June 15, 1981, reads, "Apologies will not be made for giving the highest priority to bringing pleasure to the lives of handicapped people, a priority which, on some occasions, will take precedence over training and treatment."

The opportunity to apply for a LSCA Title I grant for 1983-1984 was a perfect way to act upon this philosophy.

The canteen at Western Carolina Center contains several video games. Students at Western Carolina Center play these games during their free time; however, the machines require money and the games are played mostly by students who are earning salaries and are able to travel independently to the canteen. The time seemed right for a computer to be available in the library for games and the LSCA Title I program was our answer to the funding.

Jim Myrick, Institutional Consultant of the Division of the State Library, was our mentor in our decision to request a computer for games to be played in the library. Judy Kurzer, Director of Standards, Reports, and Special Projects and the supervisor of the library, is a strong advocate for the library and for the quality of life of our residents.

In order to apply for this grant, we had to make many decisions and do much research. The first decision was to attend an introduction to data processing class offered to Western Carolina Center personnel through Western Piedmont Community College in Morganton, N.C. This proved to be most helpful.

It was decided to make the computer available during library periods and also to make it portable so it could be checked out for games to be played in the classrooms during free time.

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A prior decision had been made to remove televisions from the classrooms and two of these ancient, but still good, 21" television sets were placed in the library. This meant we did not have to spend our grant money for a monitor. This came back to haunt us.

To meet the requirements of the grant application, we had to specify which computer would be bought. We picked up brochures, visited computer centers, talked to users and discussed the whole thing with Mr. Myrick, who is a computer buff, and, of course, compared prices. Finally, and carefully, the decision was made to purchase a Commodore 64. This computer could play games, play music, show colors, and it also showed promise of use for a long time. Its sturdiness was also in our favor. We were satisfied with the decision to purchase the Commodore 64.

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The software market for the 64 seemed to be diversified, plentiful, and forward looking. The games looked like fun and seemed to be suitable for our students.

Since we were not going to buy a monitor, we decided to purchase a 1541 disk drive, which would enable us to have access to many more games.

Our computer system was enhanced with a later grant, and we decided to purchase a printer, an Okimate 10.

We did not have to use grant funds to purchase a table as Dr. Denny Reid, director of programs, and an enthusiastic supporter of what we were trying to do, allowed us \$100 to purchase a table.

Our first joystick purchase was later adapted for the constant and sometimes rough use it would get in our setting. This joystick is still being used. We also purchased a set of remote control sticks. Some games called for paddles, and we finally found them at Sears.

The library at WCC is scheduled from Monday through Friday in forty-five minute periods. These periods are scheduled for every area on campus. Our goal was to introduce these games during the scheduled times. This learning period was supplemented by workshops and individual visits to



Mike Pettit works on the microcomputer at Western Carolina Center Library.

the computer. When the students were being taught the games, students who were not actually able to play the games enjoyed watching the games in progress. Teaching the teachers also worked out very well.

Several students visited the library independently and were taught to play any games they chose. Some students can now load and play without further instruction. Recently, a student intern selected a student and taught him to load a cartridge and to turn on the computer. How proud he became! As an after-school recreational activity, students may choose to visit with a recreator and play. Students have also dictated letters and had them printed on the Okimate.

This project has been successful for our library and we have learned many things along the way. Some of the pluses and minuses are listed below:

1. The 21" color TV is good graphically and can be seen easily; however, it is not portable. This has cut down on the use of the computer for free time out of the library.
2. The Okimate 10 printer is suitable, but a better quality printer would have been more pleasing. The quality of the color and printing, and the need for frequent ribbon changes are not in its favor.
3. The market of software for the 64 has been very good and easy to find. Places like K-Mart or Brendles have some good sales. Our favorite games are *Pac-Man*, *Clowns*, *Wizard of Wor*, *Kindercomp*, *Delat Drawing*, *Christmas Carols for the 64*, *Facemaker*, *Radar Rat Race* and *Sea Wolf*. Another favorite is the *Koala Pad*. Our players do not like *Frogmaster* or *Zork*. A borrowed copy of *Creative Writing* brought a request from a student to write a letter for him and print it for mailing. What a good idea he had!
4. We have found the Wico sticks to be sturdy and able to stand a lot of abuse. The adapted joystick is of help for the students with the use of one hand as it is clamped to the table. It, too, is very sturdy.
5. We purchased our equipment wherever we could get the best price. Our biggest problem was finding knowledgeable people to help us.

The entire experience has been enlightening, educational, frustrating, and joyful. I would jump in and do it all over again.