

# JEWISH COMMUNITY VOICE

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## With Computer Smiles, tech whiz donates to kids in need

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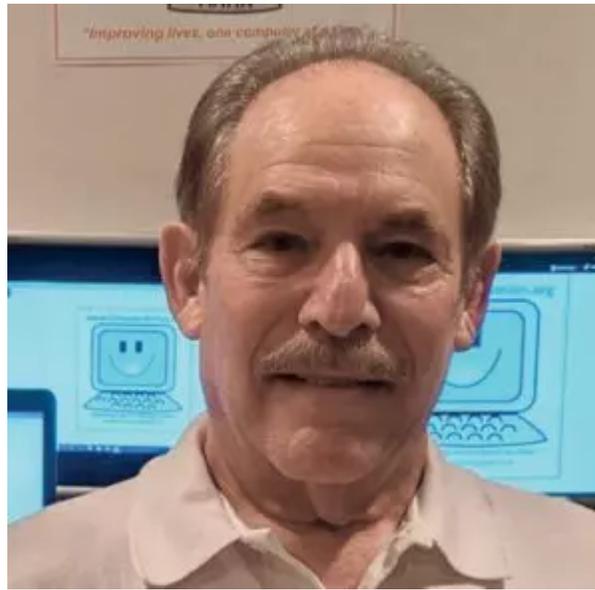
Mikayla and Sophie are thrilled after receiving computers from Computer Smiles.

Marc Goldstein thinks of himself as a “mechanical” type. When he was young, for example, he fished a toaster his mother had thrown out from the trash, took it apart, and explored how it worked. “I handed my mother back her working toaster,” he recalled. “My mother said, ‘How’d you do that?’”

When computers came along in the '80s, it was natural that they would capture Goldstein’s interest. “The first thing I did with the first computer I bought was take it apart to see how it worked,” he said. Thirty-five years later, the machines are still his primary hobby.

When Goldstein retired four years ago, he found himself with a new batch of computers to “tinker” with, thanks to a farewell gift from his company. Around that time, he spotted an article in the Cherry Hill Sun about Larry Abrams and his nonprofit organization, BookSmiles, which provides donated

books to underserved children in Philadelphia and the surrounding areas. “I thought, ‘I wonder if we could do something like that with computers,’” said Goldstein.



MARC GOLDSTEIN...founder of Computer Smiles.

He emailed Abrams, and the next day, they met for lunch. Abrams, a teacher in Lindenwold, told Goldstein about the number of kids in his school who came from homes with only one computer, or with no computer at all. “He asked if I could set up the 10 computers I had for the kids,” said Goldstein. Abrams launched an essay contest for the students with the topic: “How a Computer Would Change My Life.” He and the other teachers narrowed the submissions down to 10 students, gave Goldstein their families’ contact information, and Goldstein set up each computer at their house one by one. “I enjoyed it; I could see we were changing people’s lives,” Goldstein said.

Over the next year, Goldstein began accepting computer donations from individual homes as well as major utility companies, while Abrams assisted him in becoming a 501c3 nonprofit organization called Computer Smiles. Goldstein’s workshop spilled into his living room, and he was regularly refurbishing 5-6 computers every week. “It just snowballed over time,” said Goldstein. “It’s a good feeling to take something someone says doesn’t work and make a viable machine someone can use. It keeps them out of the landfill.”

With the onset of COVID, the need for computers rose dramatically as students began learning at home. Suddenly, Goldstein was fixing and delivering as many as 15 computers every week. “There was this sudden realization that COVID wasn’t going away, and the kids needed computers in the house. I was at the right place at the right time,” he said. Through computer drives done in conjunction with the Jewish Federation’s PJ Library program, Katz JCC, Cherry Hill Library, and requests through social media, Goldstein has been able to acquire dozens of desktops and laptops. Goldstein wipes their memories, analyzes what they need and reprograms them from the bottom up. Since March, instead of doing in-home setup, he has been sterile-wrapping the machines in Ziploc bags with the

Computer Smiles logo, a power supply, and a mouse, and meeting the new owners at a shopping center parking lot for easy handoff. “I open up the van, point to the computer, and let them take it,” he said. “I have them hold it up so I can take a picture and then they go home. No strings attached.”

Spare parts that can't be reused are brought to the YALE School in Cherry Hill as part of their “Green Vision” program. The YALE students, who have disabilities, break down the parts into recyclables, which are picked up for disposal. “The school and kids get paid and the students learn a trade,” Goldstein said. “It's a win-win for everybody.”

With Computer Smiles currently “at its peak,” Goldstein has around 10 computers packed and ready to go in his living room, so he'll be ready when an urgent need arises. “I like to have things on hand so I can respond quickly,” he said, noting that his donations go to those with stories that speak to him. One Marlton family, for example, lost their house in a fire and had to quickly relocate to a hotel. “Those are just the kind of people I'm looking for—someone in need,” said Goldstein. “The kids were doing their schoolwork on mom's phone. I met them at the hotel and set them up with two computers, so everyone could get back to work again.”

Another beneficiary was Gabrielle Lasko, a single mother in Lindenwold with twin daughters who both have special needs. When their school went virtual, the girls, who are not in the same class, were using Lasko's cell phone to log into class. “It was a nightmare,” said Lauren Rudin, Jewish Federation's Supportive Services navigator, who connected the family to Goldstein. Thanks to Computer Smiles, they received refurbished laptops. “Marc and his wife, Susan, are just so nice and really want to help,” Rudin said.

Camden County shared her sentiment when they awarded Goldstein with the Camden County Freedom Medal last year. “I'm not doing this for any recognition,” he said, “but every now and then, it's nice that people notice what we're doing and that we're making a difference.”

Goldstein's goal is to eventually donate 1,000 computers. So far, he's donated 462, of which 160 were given this year alone. “I hope we can get there,” he said. “There's a big need for it.”

That need is much larger than the supply available, which is why Goldstein is always seeking new sources for computers, especially working laptops, as well as monetary donations to purchase new power sources and computer accessories. “Now's a good time to donate,” said Rudin, “with people cleaning out their houses and needing places to send things.” Those interested in donating to Computer Smiles or learning more about the organization can visit their website,

[www.computersmiles.org](http://www.computersmiles.org)