

Windsor man on a mission to supply Haitian orphans with computers

A Windsor man who has made it his mission to try and help the poorest of North America's poor has a plan to put computers in the hands of some of the least fortunate in Haiti.

DOUG SCHMIDT, WINDSOR STAR Updated: January 28, 2015



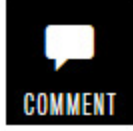
January 24, 2015. (TYLER BROWNBRIDGE/ The Windsor Star)



A Windsor man who has made it his mission to try and help the poorest of North America's poor wants to put computers in the hands of some of the least fortunate in Haiti.



"This is not to help them with their day-to-day needs — this helps give them a shot at a future," said Don Lajoie. A Windsor Star reporter who retired last year, he's hoping to raise enough funds locally to supply budget-priced tablets to a trio of island orphanages and schools with Windsor area connections.



In a Caribbean nation still far from recovered after a devastating earthquake five years ago that killed a quarter-million of its people and displaced millions more, the lucky ones have moved on from tents. But poverty remains rampant and Haiti's education system still leaves much to be desired, with books and other classroom materials in rare supply.



"Right now, kids are hindered from getting the grades needed to graduate and to succeed," said Lajoie, who has visited the island about a dozen times as a journalist and to help with development work. On his most recent visit last fall, he discovered Surtab, a company recently launched by Danish philanthropist JP Bak that has hired local workers and begun producing lightweight, no-frills, touch-screen tablets.



Students in Haiti use a tablet.

Lajoie's own experience showed him how "cumbersome and expensive," inefficient and unreliable it is to ship from abroad school books, other educational materials and even computers to the neediest on the island.

Now, for US\$100 each (\$85 with bulk orders), students in Haiti can be equipped with the Surtab 7, a basic tablet using Android that would enable its user to "access every book in the curriculum they need to graduate," surf the Internet and learn. The price includes power adaptor, earphones and protective case, and the company has agreed to set them up, said Lajoie.

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"This is a made-in-Haiti solution," he said.

At the Frank Chauvin-founded orphanage re-established after the earthquake, 20 of the 60 resident girls are high-school age and are regularly packed into a hired bus and dropped off at an Internet cafe in the nearby city where they share time on rented computers to do their studies and homework.

"This tablet would be a major leap forward for these kids," said Lajoie.

In an impoverished and corruption-rife country where the official unemployment rate is estimated at 50 per cent or more, Lajoie said obtaining computer skills brings no guarantee of a job, "but your chances improve dramatically."

Using Chinese-sourced components, 60 Surtab workers in white lab coats are currently equipped to assemble about 7,000 devices a month, with most of the product sold in Haiti and a growing number shipped to markets in Jamaica, Venezuela and some African countries. Lajoie, who toured the factory in a Port-au-Prince industrial park, said the workers, mostly women, make two- to four-times the Haitian minimum wage.

The Surtab 7, the cheapest available model, has some downsides, including a dimmer screen and shorter battery charge, but it's half the price of the next-cheapest global model, and, for the most part, it gets the job done. Lajoie took his son Marc with him on the latest trip and, serving as technical advisor, the teenager rated the device "pretty good."



Surtab staff in Haiti assemble tablets.

Lajoie, who has won awards for his reporting on Haiti over the years, said he's watched movies on his tablet and surfed the Internet with no problems. "It's a good deal," he said.

Lajoie is hoping to raise enough funds locally in the next few months to supply tablets to Chauvin's Haitian orphanage and two other facilities for children supported by Hearts Together For Haiti, of which he is a member.

Hearts Together For Haiti hosts its 15th annual charity gala on Feb. 14 at the Fogolar Furlan Club. Doors open at 5 p.m., and tickets (\$60 each; \$40 for students) include dinner and dancing with live music by Bigg Wiggle, a silent auction, raffles and more.

For more information on the Valentine's Day Ball, or to contribute to Lajoie's school tablet campaign, call 519-972-3374 or visit their website at

htfhaiti.org/

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Lajoie said he'll have his own booth at the event, collecting funds for his tablet mission. Donations are tax deductible.

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