

Last winter, operations went on hiatus and the giant computer thrift store almost folded after Ted Sobel, who'd turned a once-a-year sale into an ongoing store, "retired" from his volunteer post. He started Babbage's in 2000, creating the year-round operation from a once-a-year sale.

Rich Entlich, a librarian at Cornell University, took over coordinating Babbage's because he hated to see it fold.

"I thought it was an important community asset, and it should continue," Entlich said.

You can get a full, working PC, Mac or Linux system for \$100 to \$200, with things like extra memory installed, said Ted Crane, who has volunteered for four years and freelances as a software designer and consultant, Contra dance caller and photographer.

Babbage's will take computers "from anybody who will give them to us," he said.

Recently, volunteers were happy to get a lead on Mac G4 donations from an Ithaca College department. They were polite but covertly groaned about the arrival of yet more printers because they get a lot of printers that work, but the ink is expensive, Crane said.

While most things are welcome, Babbage's won't accept old computer terminals (old-style, i.e., VT100), television sets, microwave ovens, washing machines, dryers or dishwashers (some of these things might be taken by Tompkins County Solid Waste for reuse or recycling). They also can't take broken monitors, except for all-in-one systems such as iMacs, and LCD monitors, which are fixable.

There's some ink for sale, next to an array of memory chips. The wish list includes laptops. They go as fast as they come in, Crane said.

Computer equipment arrives from local businesses, Cornell University and Ithaca College. Babbage's also gets donations through a contract with Tompkins County Solid Waste.

"The computers we have would be recycled. What they provide is the ability to reuse the computers before they're recycled. We'd rather re-use than recycle," said Tom Richardson of Tompkins County Solid Waste.

Computers that Babbage's can't reuse go to computer recyclers, who recycle gold, plastic and others parts, Crane said.

Volunteers clean with vacuum cleaners, test and repair donations. A sampling of the wares are listed at the Web site, <http://babbagesbasement.com/>. A PowerMac G4 system was advertised recently for \$150. Babbage's has many iMac systems

If you go

Babbage's Basement is open for business and will accept donations from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Wednesdays and Saturdays in the second floor, former headquarters of Emerson Power Transmission, Route 96B, between downtown and Ithaca College. In addition to working computer systems and parts, there's an area with a Mac Museum, Einstein's Attic with lab supplies, and Trautmann's Office Treasures with office furniture and equipment, all benefiting the Sciencenter. Most donations are welcome, and are tax-deductible. To inquire about volunteering, leave a voicemail at 272-0600, Ext. 44, or send an e-mail to babbages@sciencenter.org.

On the Net

Although computers are constantly being added, you can see samples of what's available and learn about the few things Babbage's Basement won't accept:

<http://babbagesbasement.com/>

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in colors like raspberry for \$100. Dell and Compaq systems are listed on the Web site for \$150 and \$125.

“For most basic computing needs, the speed of a new computer is not necessary. It's overkill. It's one thing if you're a gaming enthusiast, but if your needs are word processing, e-mail and Web surfing a machine that's five years old is going to be perfectly adequate,” Entlich said.

While older systems might be just the thing for someone getting started on word processing and e-mail, computer aficionados regularly come to get parts for varied and obscure systems, Crane said. People who want to keep an older system going can find parts at Babbage's, and volunteers will provide advice, though can't repair anything except donations.

The volunteers install Ubuntu Linux and Knoppix systems into some of the PCs. They sometimes employ Linux — a language they say won't succumb to Windows viruses — for some purposes on site.


Babbage's has other finds. A wall of the warehouse dubbed Einstein's Attic contains lab equipment. Another section of Babbage's is Trautmann's Office Treasures, with furniture and office equipment and what were once high-end cassette duplicators.

Since its two-month closure last winter, donation streams have been restored, but there's a need for volunteers, Entlich said. Some things, like researching market prices of used computers, could be done from home, Entlich said. In addition, he seeks adult volunteers who would like to mentor teens. Computer knowledge is valuable, but so are other skills, he said. To inquire about volunteering, leave a voicemail at 272-0600, Ext. 44, or send an e-mail to babbages@sciencenter.org.

Volunteering at Babbage's is family thing for Entlich. He got involved because his son, Ari Entlich, 17, who'll enter eleventh grade at Lehman Alternative Community School, started volunteering there as an eighth grader. Ari taught himself programming. His uncle, Barry Entlich, a retired electrical engineer, also helps.

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