

Grey Bears take pride in thriving recycling and food programs

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OF THE REGISTER-PAJARONIAN

SANTA CRUZ — It is a cool autumn morning at the Grey Bears compound on Chanticleer Avenue in Live Oak and county resident Enrico Angiolani has come to recycle his computer monitor through the facility's e-waste recycling program.

"It is too big. I'm moving to a flat screen," Angiolani said, as volunteer Roland Law helps him take the cumbersome monitor out of his trunk.

Law and Angiolani are both longtime members of the 40-year nonprofit organization, whose myriad recycling programs keep everything from computer and electrical components to cardboard and plastic out of the region's landfills.

Grey Bears also operates the recycling center at the Buena Vista landfill in Watsonville and splits revenue with the county.

Walking around the 4-acre mid-county facility it's apparent that the "reduce, reuse, recycle" motto is very much in effect.

"Anything we think we can reuse, even for a buck or 50 cents, we try to keep it out of the landfill," said Tim Bratton, executive director of Grey Bears, as he points out bins filled with computer accessories — cables, keyboards, printers, routers — all bundled, ready to be reused on a refurbished computer or sold on through their onsite computer electronics store.

If a computer cannot be refurbished, then it is broken down into components — about 98 percent of a computer is recyclable, Bratton said.

Wielding a rubber mallet, Grey Bears volunteer Ken Miller starts the process of dismantling a computer tower.

Miller works in the computer department three days a week and has been volunteering at Grey Bears since 1985 — he is 94.

Having just celebrated his 70th wedding anniversary with



ABOVE: David Kerr (left) gets help from Carlos Martinez recently in unloading electronic waste products, including a monitor, VCR players and a computer, at the California Grey Bears in Live Oak. **BELOW:** Mack Fraser has been a long-time volunteer in the Grey Bears' electronic shop.

wife Lois, Miller said he comes to Grey Bears to help, and "it is something for me to do."

Ironically, Miller has a computer at home, but admits he seldom uses it.

"I am too old for that," Miller said, as he goes back to bashing the unyielding tower.

It isn't just old computers, printers, fax machines and televisions that Grey Bears will take off your hands — anything with a cord will do; they also take unwanted clothes, items for the house and garden, medical equipment, books, furniture, cardboard and plastic.

All items that can be cleaned up and resold make their way to any of a handful of specialized stores in operation at the Grey Bears facility.

There is a thrift store for clothing, which is looked after by volunteer Sandy Rose, who used to volunteer for Meals on Wheels and loves thrift stores.

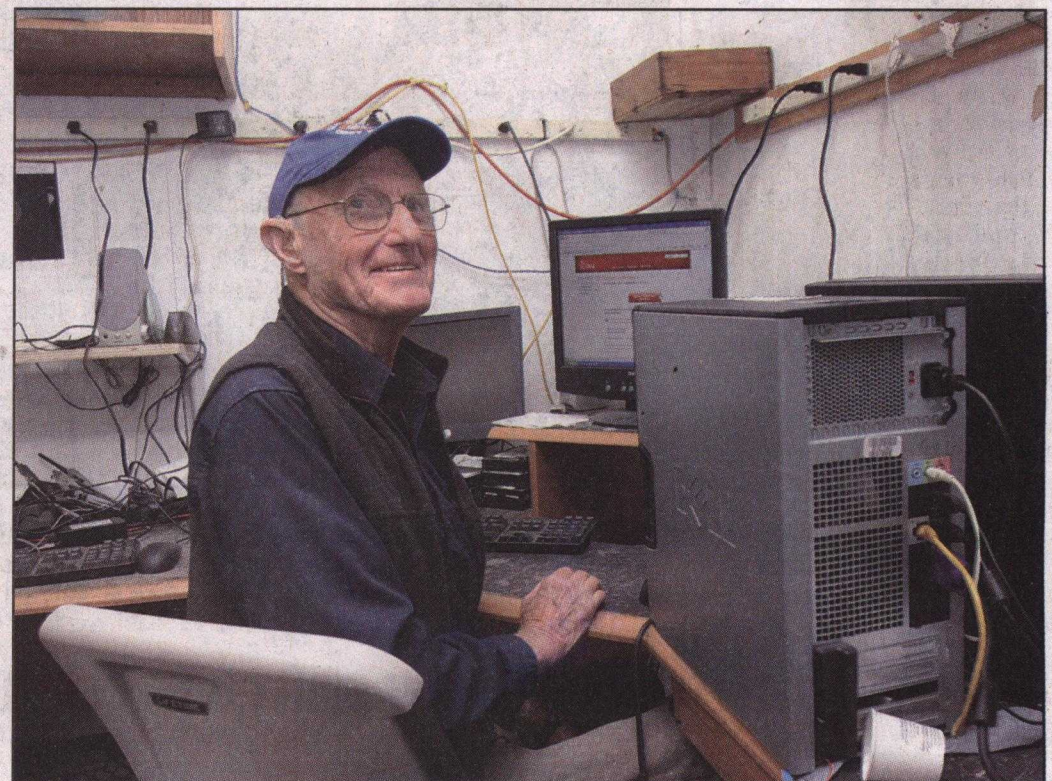
If clothes are unable to be sold in the store they are bundled up and sold by the pound, or barring that — picked up by a contact who comes from over the hill, Bratton said.

A second store features nothing but housewares, a clean, jolly environment where no dust can be found on any of the knick-knacks and statuettes — the obvious domain of meticulous grandmothers.

Housewares volunteer Cheri Boulware uses her background in merchandising to create a welcoming atmosphere in the store and said she used to watch her grandmother provide a "bed and a meal" to those in need and the example is one she's carried with her all her life, leading her to Grey Bears where she can put her skills to work on behalf of needy seniors.

In what used to be a parking space for forklifts a closet full of medical equipment such as crutches and wheelchairs are available for a fraction of what it would cost at specialized stores.

Outside, volunteer Joanne Moon has created a garden center out of donated nursery and garden supplies where you



can buy unique potted plants she put together herself or pick up a number of items for the garden.

"This is more fun than I've had all my life," Moon said.

About 75 percent of Grey Bear's total budget goes to

supporting their Brown Bag food distribution program, which provides meals for more than 4,000 seniors every week throughout the county — providing a variety of fresh produce, protein, dairy and even bread.

Grey Bears collects food from 25 local markets, sometimes everyday, said Bratton, and they are a part of Ag Against Hunger, the Salinas-based repository for surplus produce that is donated by regional agri-businesses.

When Grey Bears first started they used to go out gleaming, heading out to the agricultural fields in an old school bus, with an attached port-a-potty trailing behind them.

"It was more expensive to go out and pick. Now it is all centralized with Ag Against Hunger," Bratton said.

Two walk-in coolers are filled with bread and produce, ready to be sorted and put into bags ready for distribution.

"All local produce we use in one way or another," Bratton said. "But the big issue is — what do you do with the food

"Our primary mission is to distribute food and promote volunteerism," Bratton.

Volunteer drivers that drop off food to homebound seniors are a big component to their food distribution effort.

Fred Betz, has been bringing food to seniors unable to leave their homes for various reasons — mostly medical — for at least seven years.

Betz said that as a former businessman he looks at the Brown Bag program a little bit differently and appreciates how efficient of an operation it is.

"It takes a lot of effort to get good food and good produce to home bound people," Betz said, adding that he delivers between 80 to 85 bags a day.

"To see the great need for these groceries we deliver its rather sad, but we're glad that Grey Bears are able to do it," he said.

"People are very appreciative of the food they receive. A lot of them depend on it."

"It's a part of society that the general public does not see, and it would be a better place

waste?"

In answer to that question, Bratton shows four giant earth tubs that are used for composting any leftover food scraps into mineral-rich compost, which Grey Bears then sells for \$5 a bag.

if they did see them — in our own community," said Betz.

"When a woman tells you 'thank you, you saved my life,' that is something that sticks with you."