

Computers finally make way to schools

Union City machines reach Filipino students after red tape delayed delivery for five months

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UNION CITY — Demos Punsalan didn't encounter any red tape in obtaining and shipping nearly 1,000 discarded computers and printers from Union City schools to the Philippines.

But getting the machines through customs and into the hands of needy students turned into a five-month bureaucratic nightmare that didn't end until the office of President Gloria Arroyo became involved.

"It's never easy when you become entangled in politics," said Punsalan, a Filipino immigrant.

The San Ramon resident is co-founder of California Technological Care, a nonprofit that has refurbished nearly 2,300 computers to give to underfunded schools, mostly in the Philippines, where Punsalan says there is one computer for every 24,000 elementary school students. When The Argus reported on Punsalan last May, he was preparing to send nearly 1,000 Macs — manufactured circa 1997 — that had been donated by the New Haven Unified School District.

Over the course of a few weeks in July and August, the machines were shipped 7,000 miles aboard a vessel from Oakland to Manila.

But once in the Philippines they remained sealed in the shipping container as Punsalan tried to sort out what he said was an internal dispute within the country's Department of Education.

It turned out that Punsalan's Memorandum of Understanding with the department was signed by the wrong official, he said.

With the department secretary position vacant, the undersecretary determined that he should have been the one to sign the agreement, Punsalan said.

Instead it was signed by a lower-ranking official, who, Punsalan was told, had feuded with the undersecretary and left the department, apparently to enter politics.

Why couldn't the undersecretary or the newly appointed secretary just sign a new agreement and release the machines?

"That's the same question we asked," Punsalan said.

In January, after months of lobbying by Punsalan and supporters of his group, the president's office moved in to break the impasse, Punsalan said.

The machines were finally delivered this month to schools in the provinces of Pampanga, Cavite and Batangas, where Punsalan was on hand to help distribute them.

"You just can't believe how happy the kids were," he said. Over the next few weeks, volunteers will help the students reconfigure the machines and train them to fix future malfunctions, said Punsalan, whose group last year received a Presidential Award from Arroyo for its work.

The delay, however, did take its toll on the organization.

It had to pay the shipping company \$3,000 for use of the shipping containers through January.

Also, during the stalemate, Punsalan said, he had to reject offers of about 1,300 discarded computers from the New Haven and Hayward school districts.

"The past is the past," said Punsalan, who has a new agreement with the Philippines government to avoid future hassles. "We're hoping to send at least two more (shipping) containers this year," he said.



LORNA AQUINO, principal of Panipuan Integrated School, observes students using newly donated computers.