

Blue Star Recyclers puts disabled to work



“Eighty-five percent of people with developmental disabilities are unemployed. Any type of work they can get is a huge win.”

– Blue Star’s Andy O’Reilly.

Blue Star has a relationship with Community Intersections under which it hires the developmentally disabled.

By Dennis Huspeni
Contributing Writer

To anyone else, the huge pile of old computers stacked at Blue Star Recyclers looks like trash.

But Bill Morris sees something else in that jumbled pile — jobs.

And the bigger Morris can make that pile, the more jobs Blue Star can create.

“That’s our mission statement,” said Morris, Blue Star’s president. “Create jobs by recycling.”

The electronics recycling company rose out of the ashes of another electronics recycling company that folded last year. It’s located at 690 Elkton Drive, just north of Garden of the Gods Road. When the previous business owner faltered, the business’ assets were surrendered to building owners Tony and Mary Fagnant. Last September, they hired Morris, who used to work for a large electronics recycling company.

To set themselves apart from competitors, Blue Star picks up the smallest amount of “e-waste” — even one computer. Larger recyclers, Morris said, often will not dispatch a truck unless they can pick up a full load.

“We’re trying to make it so easy to recycle, so that the average business says, ‘What the heck’ and goes with us,” he said.

Colorado law requires businesses and institutions to recycle electronic equipment.

While no such law applies to individuals, Blue Star has established drop-off centers for household users. For a small fee, the company accepts almost anything that plugs in or uses batteries, with the exception of large appliances.

But the most unique aspect of Blue Star is its relationship with Community Intersections, a non-profit group that offers services to adults with developmental disabilities.

In addition to five permanent Blue Star staff members, eight Community Intersections participants work at the plant disassembling electronics.

The electronics must be taken apart so all the components — which could be made of plastic, metal or glass — can be recycled properly. The more valuable materials from

computers include the high-grade boards and processors. Precious metals like gold, silver or copper also can be found in many electronics, Morris said.

“Some 95 to 98 percent of everything that goes into all electronics can be recycled,” Morris said.

The workers are paid 10 cents per pound, in addition to getting pay from Community Intersections.

“Eighty-eight percent of people with developmental disabilities are unemployed,” said Andy O’Reilly, director of material processing. “Any type of work they can get is a huge win.”

Chris Garcia, 23, works about 25 hours a week.

“I like to tear apart electronics,” Garcia said. “It’s something I’ve been doing for a long time, but I wasn’t getting paid for it. This is the first paying job I’ve ever had.”

Garcia’s supervisor, Anthony Trujillo, said the repetitive nature of the work is perfect for those with developmental disabilities.

“They get a sense of belonging to the community,” Trujillo said. “They feel like they’re making a difference — which they are.”

The difference is this: less electronic waste is heading to area landfills and the demand for raw materials — especially mined metals — to make new electronics drops if more recycled material is used.

Though there’s a minimal cost to recycle electronics, Morris said people are willing to pay it after they learn about facts like monitors and television have lead in them, which can leech into the ground once broken.

“Once they’re educated, it’s almost impossible for them not to do the right thing,” Morris said.

Almost 75 percent of Blue Star’s recycled electronics come from business, institutions and school districts, he said. The rest comes from residential sources.

Harrison School District 2, for example, has recycled some 30,000 pounds of electronic waste this year after upgrading its computers.

Harrison’s purchasing agent, Perry Broxton, said it had previously done business with other electronics recyclers in Colorado Springs. They went with Blue Star because



Andy O’Reilly, who has muscular dystrophy, is Blue Star’s director of material processing.

the price was competitive.

“Blue Star was also able to come out to individual schools, which was extremely helpful to us,” Broxton said.

The company works with non-profit groups to organize collection events, allowing the group to take any profits earned on the event, Morris said. For example, more than 6,000 pounds of electronics waste was collected at a July event for the Lewis-Palmer High School boys’ basketball team.

Morris thinks the Blue Star business model can be replicated in smaller communities that may be far from electronics recyclers.

But for now, Blue Star employees are just trying to grow that pile so they can create more taxpayers.

“There’s just a purity to this,” said O’Reilly, who himself suffers from muscular dystrophy. “I’ve never experienced anything like it.”