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Digital Emergency Responders

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Digital emergency responders

Names: Roy Bailey and Tim Johnson
Position: Computer Support Specialists
Years with IWU: 10 and one, respectively



Johnson (left) and Bailey have to know their way around Macs and PCs, since both are used on campus. In their workshop, they maintain an informal museum of digital artifacts that span the history of computers on campus. One of their prized displays is an Apple IIe, which was the standard in public schools in the '80s.

The two seem to exist in a state of perpetual motion. Walkie-talkies in hand to stay in touch with one another, Roy Bailey and Tim Johnson could be anywhere on the IWU campus at any moment, responding to a call of assistance from a busy professor or student whose computer is on the blink — usually at a time when it is urgently needed. It's no wonder that one of the most common phrases greeting either man when he walks into an office is "Thank God you're here!"

Bailey and Johnson are the on-call troubleshooters for the University's Information Technology Department (known as "IT"). Dispatched to answer between 12 to 18 calls a day, on average, they can be called upon to fix anything from an unplugged mouse to a crashing hard drive.

"People are so used to using computers that when they suddenly can't, it becomes a crisis for them," says Johnson.

"Everyone's calls are important to us, because it is important to them," adds Bailey. "Sometimes we have to prioritize, but that doesn't mean we've forgotten anyone." Just the week before, the pair were called off the list of waiting jobs to race to the one payroll computer on campus. "Roy recognized that (the payroll computer) was in imminent danger of system failure," says Johnson. "We averted a big crisis."

While measuring degrees of urgency, the two try to treat all of the campus's 1,000-plus desktop computers — and the people who depend on them — equally. "One day we're in the President's Office, the next we're in a lab that gets used an hour a day," says Bailey. "They all need our help." Along with several student workers, the task of computer support on campus falls to

Bailey and Johnson, which means the two always have jobs waiting for them. “The last time I didn’t have a backlog was July 4, 1999,” says Bailey. “Honestly!”

When not out on call, Bailey and Johnson can be found in their workshop, the former home of the campus bookstore, behind the Memorial Center. The large room could be mistaken for storage, with towers and computer pieces perched on tables and shelves and congregated across the green-and-white-tiled floor. Yet this is the active workroom, where Bailey and Johnson custom-build and upgrade desktop computers or decommission them for recycling.

The two are an interesting pair. Bailey, who has worked at Illinois Wesleyan for more than a decade, grew up in the Florida Everglades, but moved to Heyworth, Ill., in the early 1970s. Soft-spoken, with a twinkle in his eyes and a bit of Crocodile Dundee swagger in his step, Bailey reveals that his hobbies — including bow-hunting, landscaping, and raising chickens — have nothing to do with technology.

Johnson, on the other hand, is a self-described “computer geek,” who collects “antique” computers. “I don’t buy new computers anymore,” says the Rockford native, whose expression lights up when he talks about a new Mac. “I see all the latest technology here. I just have to wipe the drool off before it goes out,” jokes Johnson, who is also a film and music buff.

Despite their differences, the two men obviously share a mutual respect while also relying on one another to relieve the stress of their jobs with a much-needed joke, crackling through the static of their walkie-talkies. Johnson tries to help Bailey fix campus computers as much as he can, though his main role is to install new computers and take the old ones away — most desktop machines need to be rotated out every three to four years.

“We have about 700 pieces to recycle this time,” says Bailey, standing next to a 4-foot-high stack of computer towers from the past two years. “We’re a green campus, so we don’t throw anything in the Dumpster. We like to donate when we can to schools or other groups.” He points to a row of Macs against the wall. “These are going to a church. They’re so grateful for any kind of technology.”



There are some pieces that Bailey and Johnson cannot bear to recycle. A door leads from their workshop to a smaller room lined with a dozen or so computers and computer parts that are considered ancient by today’s gigabyte standards. “We call this the museum,” says Bailey with pride, pointing to an Apple IIe, one of the very first and most successful personal computers.

“We show students these and it brings back a flood of memories for them,” he says, a reference to the fact that Apple IIs were the de facto standard computers in American public schools during the 1980s. Many new students see the old computers when they stop in during first-year orientation week. “We offer free anti-virus software for students and help them set up their e-mail,” Bailey says. “The parents seem to appreciate that, and I think the students do, too.”

Indeed, Bailey and Johnson consider themselves lucky that their presence is so widely appreciated on campus, as is evident by the column in the middle of their workroom covered with the thank-you notes and letters they’ve received. “They also give us goodies,” says Bailey, pushing up the rim of his black cap with white letters reading *IT @ IWU*. “We get cookies and brownies. Even a pineapple upside-down cake once,” he recalls with a chuckle.

Fixing computers takes skill, patience, persistence — and apparently a lot of chocolate. “Yeah, people know to hoard chocolate for when Roy and I come around,” says Johnson.