CMU brain power boosts charities

By Steve Levin
Post-Gazette Staff Writer

For 14 weeks this semester, Carnegie Mellon University senior Brian Cooke had Beanie Babies on his mind. He also spent more than 100 hours thinking about ring binders, pantyhose and children's clothes.

But it was time well spent for Cooke, 21, and the other five seniors on his team in the Information Systems Applications class they were taking. And it worked out great for the Pittsburgh Community Storehouse, a nonprofit organization that raises donated nonperishable goods and distributes them to charitable groups.

For the Carnegie Mellon class, Cooke's team designed and built a Web-based solution for the storehouse that gives it the ability to track inventory and improve overall management, while allowing its members to view available goods and submit wishes.

"It helps reduce paperwork," he said.

Cooke's team and 11 other student groups presented their work Friday at Carnegie Mellon, Professor Cleonidle Gonzalez, who taught the course, estimated that the students donated about $1 million in time and work to the participating nonprofit groups, which included North Hills Community Outreach, the Pittsburgh Zoo & Aquarium, Operation Safety Net, Light of Life Ministries and Palliative.

The course, which has been providing such help for 10 years, is part of the Information Systems program in the school's College of Humanities and Social Sciences. The full course is required of all information and decision systems majors, Gonzalez said. That major, formerly known as Information systems, often leads to graduates working in consulting companies, large corporations, Internet start-ups and information companies.

"Our focus is developing solutions to business problems," Gonzalez said. "At the beginning of the course, all we have to work with is a problem. At the end, you see a solution [for that problem]."

The course requires students not only to select, design, implement and test the technological underpinnings of their projects, but also to deal with clients who may not be up to date on certain technologies or even know what system they need to improve their business.

Nonprofit organizations have heard about the Carnegie Mellon course through word of mouth, Gonzalez said. It costs them nothing to have to make time to meet with the students.

This semester, her first teaching the course, Gonzalez assigned six-member teams to work with various nonprofit groups. She tried to give the teams an interdisciplinary tint: While some students may have been more adept with computer technology, others were better versed in research methods or writing.

Contracts were drawn up delineating mutual responsibilities between the teams and the nonprofit groups. The class met three times a week, and each week the teams delivered agendas for their work along with progress reports. Gonzalez estimated that each student spent at least an additional 10 hours a week on the project.

"At the end of [the semester], I'm sure that they did not sleep for several days," she said.

Kim Colon's team was assigned to work with Operation Safety Net, the innovative outreach program at Mercy Hospital of Pittsburgh, Uptown, which provides medical care, support and referral services to the homeless.

Portal.

"I also learned that I do not spend enough time giving back to the community in which I live. I hope to continue my relationship with [Operation Safety Net] after this semester is over," she said.

Columbia and her teammates developed a Web-based database that allows Operation Safety Net's doctors and nurses to access the medical records of the hundreds of homeless patients they serve by using handheld computers in the field.

Previously, the staff carried bulky paper files without ever knowing which clients they might see.

To ensure that their solution worked, the students guided the nonprofit-program in the purchase of all the necessary computer hardware.

"The group of Carnegie Mellon students was very committed to this project," said Linda Seger, program administrator for Operation Safety Net. "It was a joint partnership where we looked at a number of options."

"Figuring out what was best for the future led to our decision. The least amount of paper but with more accurate and useful information is what was going to serve our patients the best.

For students, Gonzalez said the course's biggest benefit was getting out of the classroom and into the daily business of the nonprofit groups.

"This is something many of the companies that hire these students want to see — that they have real-world experience," she said.

Nonprofit groups interested in participating in future Information Systems Applications classes at Carnegie Mellon can contact the Center for University Outreach at 412-383-8083.

Parents, children protest plan to close Whittier school

By Johnna A. Pro
Post-Gazette Staff Writer

"We were going to have the Whittier Walk to Prospect, where they want to send our children, but that's too far," Sharon Paull shouted through a bullhorn.

"Instead, we'll walk to the overpass. We want the people in the city to hear us. We want the board of education to hear us when we tell them once and for all to keep Whittier open.

Faull is president of the Whittier Elementary School PTA.

Among the group was Sherri Becker, the mother of three, who wore a button proclaiming, "This is a world-class school." Once at the overpass, Paull told the marchers that their walk, which covered several blocks and took a few minutes — less than half of the distance that their children would walk should Whittier close and be reassigned to Prospect School on the back side of Mount Washington.

While the group was Whittier beliefs toward what the board heard.

Hertzberg told the crowd he was confident that would be successful in their fight to save Whittier and once that battle was won, then among the three.

"We need to tell the Legislature that we want them to help us save public education," Hertzberg shouted, winning a cheer from the group.

Night of Peace bows in Lawrenceville

Nearly 300 Lawrenceville residents, led by City Council President Bob O'Connor and Councilman Jim Ferko, held a candlelight march yesterday evening in celebration of their community last night, during which residents expressed concerns growing over the number of prostitutes and open-air drug sales occurring on their streets. In addition, residents were disturbed by the shooting last month of a prostitute who knew many as a little girl.

"It drove home the fact that this wasn't a stranger or an alien. This was one of our own lost to the streets," said Rev. Bob Pastor, pastor of the First Primitive Methodist Church.

Pastor said that while the neighborhood has changed ethnically and culturally over the years, the Night of Peace was meant to bring together people of disparate races and relations.