Miracle on Computer Street

Way back in 1947 there was a movie filmed entitled Miracle on 34th Street, in which a Santa Claus in a New York department store brought happiness to a little boy. I don't remember the plot, but I remember the name of the movie and that it had a happy ending.

Well, the same sort of thing happened to me. What began as the usual nightmare, when a computer goes on the fritz, turned out to have a happy ending. The moment my computer ceased to function normally I took it to Staples Tech Service for a diagnostic check-up. That cost $69.99. After the check-up I was informed that the needed repairs would cost over $300. So after some thought, I decided to purchase a new computer.

The new computer I bought was a Dell Inspiron for $454.11, including tax. Set-up cost an additional $63.98. They also convinced me to purchase a Norton anti-virus program that cost $69.99. Thus, by the time I picked up my new computer, I had spent $588.05.

When I got home, I connected all the wires. A Microsoft 7 system had been installed. But it did not have a word processor, which is what I need most on a computer, so that I can write articles and anything else and send them off to my publisher. Fortunately, someone told me about OpenOffice, which can be downloaded free of charge, and that program had a word processor in it.

But then another problem developed. When I pressed "print," nothing happened. I complained at Staples that the computer did not come with a handbook of instructions. The young man at the Tech Service told me that computers no longer came with handbooks because they had become too large and expensive and that I should get hold of Dell online and have one of their technicians solve the problem.

So I spent an hour on the phone with someone in India who tried all sorts of ways to get my printer started. Meanwhile, after disconnecting and reconnecting the printer several times it ceased to work at all.

What to do? I had noticed a local computer repair and sales shop in a private house on the main road in town and had passed it many times and had no idea what went on inside. So I decided to see if they could help me. I walked into a dimly lit workshop with lots of reconditioned computers for sale. The owner, John, about 60 years old, sat behind a busy-looking desk, and I told him what was wrong with my printer — and he told me to bring it in for a look-see. Meanwhile, I noticed that the reconditioned computers, many of them Dells, were selling for as little as $175.

The thought occurred to me that perhaps I could return the expensive new Dell and buy one of these. Indeed, I drove down to Staples and was told that I could return the new computer and get my money back, minus the set-up charge and the cost of the Norton anti-virus system they had installed. There was plenty of time in the 14 days allowed for returns.

I then took my printer to John's shop and looked around at the reconditioned computers. I decided to buy a Dell very much like the one I had, and a young, tall technician by the name of Chris helped me check it out. It had a word processor, and I was able to test it out to my satisfaction. But because there was a problem with my documents, Chris asked me to bring in my old computer to see if he could detect

the cause of the problem.

So I brought in the old computer and was told that they would call me when everything was ready. The next day I got a call from John, telling me that the printer had been repaired and that I did not need a reconditioned computer, because they were able to repair my old one.

The next day I took the new computer back to Staples and got a refund of $454.11. Later that day, Chris brought my reconditioned computer and printer to my home and installed all the parts. Still I could not get the printer to print. So he managed to download a program that made the printer work. He knew computers inside out.

Chris is a computer expert, having toyed with computers since middle school here in Littleton, Massachusetts. He got a degree in Computer Science at Lowell University, which has an excellent program on computer technology. He was as helpful as can be: a gentleman and a technician. The total cost of refurbishing my computer and printer and coming to the house and setting everything up to make sure that it worked was $223.26 — that is, $364.79 less than what everything cost at Staples.

Don't get me wrong. I like Staples for many of the other products and services they offer. But when it comes to computers, it's good to know that there are other solutions out there that we have been overlooking. In other words, there are lots of small, local computer workshops that are very well worth looking into. They are part of America's small businesses and free enterprises that keep our country working.

So, that was indeed a happy ending to what could have been an ongoing nightmare had I relied only on Staples. There are decent people in this world very willing and able to help those who need it, and not take them for all they're worth. It was something of a miracle to have found someone as helpful and competent as Chris. When I went to the office to pay the bill, I told John that he ought to give Chris a raise. I think he knew what a gem of a technician Chris was, and that's why he now had one new loyal customer.

The moral of the story? If you have a computer problem, instead of taking it to a big-box store technical service department, look around for a local computer workshop where they employ great young computer technicians who love their work and are not out to sell you something. A brand new computer is no guarantee that it will work better than a well-reconditioned older one. And you will save loads of money.

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