



NEW GEAR — Belle Haven School fourth-grader Miya Brumfield walks back to class carrying a laptop computer after participating in a demonstration at the school Nov. 6 in Menlo Park. East Palo Alto and Menlo Park have become the nation's most prominent laboratories for closing the "digital divide." AP photo by Julie Jacobson.

Digital bridge proves elusive

BY THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

An island of poverty in the center of Silicon Valley, East Palo Alto has become one of the nation's most prominent laboratories for closing the "digital divide" — the gulf in technology resources between poor communities and everyone else.

The city's plight has drawn the attention of many companies headquartered nearby and received nearly \$8 million in computers, software and other technology donations over the past two years, according to the Peninsula Community Foundation, a charitable trust.

Residents, teachers and policy experts say the high-tech generosity has improved East Palo Alto's prospects, but it's also clear that good intentions and big donations can only go so far. Many organizations find themselves with expensive new technology, but a lack of infrastructure to support it. There's also a shortage of people who can train residents how to use the technology.

To make matters worse, the downturn in the high-

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tech economy has meant less funding is available. Community groups are increasingly looking toward government aid rather than corporate donations.

"As soon as we catch up, the rest of the world is already down the road," said Faye McNair-Knox, director of Start Up, which helps

local businesses use technology. East Palo Alto, population 30,000, has no banks or supermarkets. Forty-two murders in 1992 earned it the distinction as the nation's "murder capital."

Last year, only one homicide was recorded, and Mayor Duane Bay says even petty crimes are declining, in part because of a rise in after-school

programs. Plans are under way for a new community clinic and a new technology center in the heart of town. Three years ago, East Palo Alto schools had just one computer for every 28 students — less than one-third the statewide average. Now there is one computer for every six students, on par with the statewide average.
