

E-recyclers wired for job

Couple integrates old circuitry back into usefulness



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Published: 6/18/2009 2:18 AM
Last Modified: 6/18/2009 7:16 PM

Correction: This story originally contained an inaccurate fee for the recycling of video monitors. The story has been corrected.

Traci and Chris Phillips stand among discarded electronics that their company, Natural Evolution, will recycle. Natural Evolution accepts "anything with a plug," and more.

MICHAEL WYKE / Tulsa World

When Traci Phillips of Natural Evolution says they accept "anything with a plug," they mean it.

The rolling heaps of broken and outmoded electronics at the electronics recycling center contain just about anything electronic — cell phones, televisions, computers, toys containing microchips, electric razors, typewriters, photo development booths, even an 11,000-pound nuclear imaging device.

In fact, Phillips is so used to the variety of techno-junk that she's rarely fazed by unusual pieces anymore.

"This is the land of the odd," she said. "We see a lot of strange things regularly."

Despite the array of discarded items, Phillips and her husband, Chris, are hoping for even more electronics to process. They've been big believers in tech recycling even before they founded Natural Evolution six years ago.

E-waste can be a big headache for landfills, Traci said, noting that equipment could take hundreds of years to break down. Electronics also can emit toxic chemicals such as lead and mercury into the soil.

The amount of junked tech has risen dramatically over the last 20 years as consumers flock to the newest TVs, computers, cell phones and other gadgets, tossing away what is broken or obsolete.

"The rate of turnover is so great now, the volume is astronomical," Traci said.

Options for tech recycling were minimal in Oklahoma at the beginning of the decade, so when Traci was laid off from WilTel Communications Inc. in 2002, she and Chris decided to take matters into their own hands.

Awareness of e-recycling is growing, but Traci said many people still don't realize their company and other electronics recyclers are now options.

"Tech recycling is a lot more understood now than even a year ago," she said. "But for some, it's still a habit to just leave it for the trash."

Natural Evolution accepts electronics from consumers who drop off their personal equipment at 5719 E. 13th St., and from businesses who have regular contracts with the recycler. Though most electronics can be recycled, the company does not accept anything that has used gasoline or antifreeze, and it charges a \$15 fee for TVs and \$5 for other video monitors.

"It's more expensive to recycle televisions due to the lead in the glass," Traci said.

The Phillips' operation breaks down the equipment and separates the basic components, such as plastic shells or circuit boards. It also trades devices with Recycle for Life in Oklahoma City and New Mexico Recycling in Albuquerque.

Once broken down, Natural Evolution sends the components to special refineries that melt them down.

The Phillipses say they've gotten a steady stream of customers taking advantage of the city of Tulsa's television recycling program, which allows people to recycle their old TVs for free. Interested residents may obtain a recycling voucher by contacting the city program at 596-9777.

Natural Evolution has not seen a rise in television recycling this year amid the transition to digital signals. Instead, the volume went up sharply two years ago due to the proliferation of HDTVs.

"The tech got a lot more reasonably priced, and more people can afford it," Traci said.