Have laptop, will travel

story and photos by Lori Richard

THE COMPANY NAME "A Tech for Hire" might remind you of an old Western gunslinger, riding around ready to save the day. Fairhaven resident Todd Herman's business isn't all that different from the gunslinger scenario, except in Todd's case he carries a laptop and a well-honed ability to repair computers that seem to have bitten the dust.

His education, hands-on experience and a knack for visualizing abstract problems, such as those which exist in cyberspace, have gained him a number of loyal customers and many new friends in southeastern Massachusetts. Todd took a very circuitous route to arrive at this place, owning his own business, which will mark its first full year this April.

"I've been using computers back since I was a kid," Todd said. "I liked playing games, and as the computers got more complicated I needed to upgrade and make modifications to get my games to work. It helped me in college," he added. During his days studying psychology at San Diego State University, Todd did a lot of "tinkering" on his friends' computers to help them out, and just because he enjoyed it. Out of college he "bounced around," at one point working in San Francisco for Game Spot, which was bought by Ziff-Davis Publications.

Then, "the internet boom started happening," explained Todd. His residency in the City by the Bay put him right in the center of the cutting edge computer world. Even though he worked in a sales office and helped out with tech support, "I wanted to be with people in the computer business," he
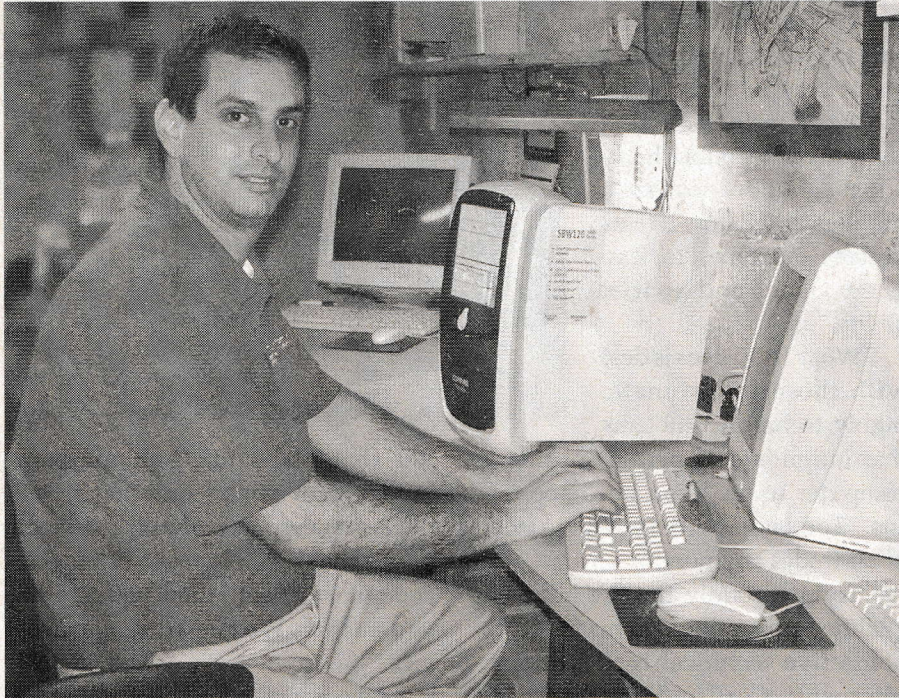
Todd Herman is ready to save the day when a client has computer problems.

said. The experience he gained was invaluable.

That's when his brother's big idea hit. Brant Herman suggested that he and Todd start People Cards, a company which featured ordinary people on their own trading cards. "We thought, 'People are interesting. We should do something with this,'" Todd recalled. "I built a website and we received 2,000 responses. We picked 105 in the first series and [obtained] information from them."

Such a simple concept garnered a great deal of attention. NPR and CNN picked up People Cards on their radar, and some 200 newspapers, magazines and morning shows highlighted their business, as well. "It was a little fame for us," Todd said. "It was a great experience in starting a company, and I built the network and sales for it." However, the novelty of People Cards wore off eventually. As Todd remembered it, "The bubble burst. . . and it petered out." Still, the experiment laid the groundwork for his current success.

Later he worked for Monster.com, installing satellite dishes for a promotional sales team outside of Boston. This marked the first time Mr. Herman was paid to do tech support. The temporary job gave him the opportunity to be certified in satellite dish installation, and the desire to pursue a full-time career in computer repair.

"It's one thing to do something as a hobby," Todd said of his decision to pursue his interest as a career move. "But you don't realize when you've worked 12 hours a day that it's a good hobby, but maybe not a good job." Todd was one of the lucky ones. "I found my calling."

In 2002 Todd and his wife Cheryl moved to Fairhaven. Cheryl's family lives locally—her grandfather, George Schwartz, owned Park Motors—so the move for them was a natural one. (They have since become proud par-

found employment as a full-time computer repair technician with the Mobile PC Doctor in Brewster. As lead technician of a team of four or five techs, he travelled all over Cape Cod, meeting interesting people and encountering a multitude of computer challenges.

According to Mr. Herman, a good computer repair technician, first and foremost, has an open, flexible mind. "This is probably one of the few times in history that children have the ability to teach older generations," he remarked. "The computer is designed for an open mind. . . . You can't know everything about computers, no one can, but a main, basic skill techs need is troubleshooting abilities. To visualize a problem and follow it to its possible outcomes, to have good visual and spatial ability."

What Todd does is deal with those unfortunate, highly technical problems that intimidate or perplex ordinary computer users. "You need specialists," Todd noted. "We can't be a jack-of-all-trades anymore."

Todd certainly fits the bill as a qualified professional in his field. He holds five technical certifications: Microsoft Certified Professional (MCP), Microsoft Certified Systems Administrator (MCSA), A+ Technician for CompTIA (Computer Technician Industry Association of America), Network Plus technician for CompTIA, and certified satellite technician, as well as other certifications.

Earning such credentials not only opened the door to his Mobile PC Doctor job, it gave him the street credibility he needed for starting his own business, where he had to sell his skills under a new, unknown name. A Tech for Hire draws upon Todd's patchwork of business, sales and technical

with the company. He met his income goals in November, and business continued to flow in the winter. His success, he believes, is contingent upon the service he gives his clients. Word-of-mouth is everything in a small town like Fairhaven.

"When you provide a good service for a reasonable price, and when you are respectful of people's time, people

like that," he said. "I charge more money than some [computer techs], but less than some of the on-site repair places that require you to bring your computer to them. I think you get what you pay for. We guarantee good service."

Like a doctor, Todd has sworn his own Hippocratic oath to keep all information on his clients' computers strictly private. Confidentiality builds trust, and that's his primary service goal. "Trust is very important and once it's lost, you can never get it back," he said. "It's important for me to do a good job for you. . . . My best source of new business is referrals."

Todd finds great satisfaction in making his clients happy. "There is an instant gratification factor to it," he admitted. "There's a cause and effect. You make a change and it makes a difference. When I arrive they are so frus-

trated they want to throw their computer out the window. When I finish you can see the relief on their faces. They're so appreciative when I leave. A lot of people say they didn't realize how much they use their computer until it's not working.

"It's a good feeling to help solve their problems," he added. "They'll say, `I hope I don't see you again soon,' and I'd rather not hear from them for a year than have them calling me every four months. At least I know I did my job well."

Todd passes his good fortune on to his customers, as well. Todd strives

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> **—Todd Herman**

to help them come up with the best cost-saving solutions available. He sometimes advises customers when, frankly, their computers are not worth fixing. If the solution will cost close to or more than a new computer, it's probably not worth their money, he noted.

A Tech for Hire is among the small number of Staples' Easy Mobile Techs that they hire when their own technicians are unavailable to take a call. Todd acknowledged that, as an independent repairman, he has more freedom to handle jobs with creativity. "A lot of people in the `box' places have very narrow parameters they can work in." Many times they, themselves, will call a help line when they can't solve the problem on-site. Or, he added, they know what to do but must schedule additional appointments to come back and finish the job, all at the customers' expense.

Some 10 to 15 percent of Todd's business comes from people who say a friend set up their system and now it's not working. "They get frustrated

[because] their time is valuable. There's a monetary loss, especially with a business, when your computer's not working." Because they're much more delicate and complicated than a television set, it takes longer to learn the ins and outs of computer maintenance. But Todd believes everyone can learn, if they have the right tools and instruction.

"I try to give them the tools, to educate them on what went wrong," he noted. "I use analogies, and a lot of people like that I speak in non-technical terms. I give them the tools to solve the problem the next time." He also tutors his clients on how to use digital cameras, MP3 players, Palm Pilots, and any other electronic items which perplex their owners. He offers tips and short cuts on using Power Point and Word Excel, too.

He has read that about 80 percent of computer owners lack one of three basic security requirements. These are anti-virus, firewall and anti-spyware software. "They're vulnerable. They say it takes the average [hacker] 20 minutes to break into a system. . . .

"People have expensive equipment and invaluable data," he said. "I always encourage people to back up their data in some kind of archiving process." Unfortunately, some have learned that lesson too late, when they find they cannot retrieve an important document or photo because of computer failure.

Another bit of advice Todd always stresses is address a small problem before it grows too big. Most people, who have limited time and knowledge, ignore the "symptoms" of a sick computer until the glitch turns into a money-eating monster. "Don't put problems off too long," he advised.

Todd noted he returns all phone calls within a few hours, and all e-mail inquiries within 24 hours. A complete list of A Tech for Hire's services is included on the company's website at *www.atechforhire.com.* You can e-mail Todd Herman at *todd@atechforhire.com,* or call him at 508-207-6807. ❖