



Mike Verhulst, left, helps his dad, Steve Verhulst, Ph.D., work with a donated computer at Computer Banc, where father and son have volunteered for four years.

Plugged in

From researchers and statistics to families and computers, Steve Verhulst makes the connection

Written by Karen Carlson • Photography by James Hawker

Steve Verhulst, Ph.D., hunches over an old computer, working in its guts to install a memory board. You'd think that as a statistician, Dr. Verhulst would instead be using the computer to crunch the numbers. But this "surgery" is part of his volunteer work with Computer Banc, a local organization that refurbishes and donates used computers to children with learning challenges who come from homes with limited incomes.

"My son needed to do some volunteer work, so at first I did it for him," Dr. Verhulst says. "But I've really enjoyed learning and helping others. It's relaxing for me." He has worked with Computer Banc for four years and now serves on the board of directors. "I enjoy helping to keep it running and seeing the outreach in the community." All ages, from youths to seniors, volunteer at the local bank, which serves families in Springfield and, from as far away as Rockford and Chicago.

Anne Godman, executive director of Computer Banc says a lot of parents like Steve join the ranks of volunteers. "Steve is a man of many talents," she says. "He's also been a great help in the non-technical areas, serving on the board, organizing equipment, helping to maintain the facility and loading computers to send out to families — he's been wonderful."

Dr. Verhulst works side-by-side with his son, Michael, who plans to study aerospace engineering. Dr. Verhulst's wife, Bonnie, is a school

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teacher, and his daughter, Lori, is a college junior and a competitive Irish dancer.

Computers, monitors and printers crowd the floor of Computer Banc. Shelf after shelf is lined with stacks of keyboards, hard drives and computer cords just waiting to be plugged in. On a typical Saturday, the CB crew is busy training new volunteers, getting ready for a garage sale and preparing to meet 26 new families who need computers.

There’s an increased need for computers at this time of year when students are going back to school, so the Banc is busy filling the demand and accepting newly donated Pentium II computers.

“Computers are a necessity for students these days, and the families are really appreciative,” Dr. Verhulst says. Systems are loaded with Windows™, a word processing package and educational software such as a reading program with 80 books on it. They even provide a few games. As a secondary mission, Computer Banc offers computers to not-for-profit agencies.

“I fill in as needed,” Dr. Verhulst says, whether it’s uploading software or fixing the kitchen sink, he says he has learned a lot. Last year, the organization supplied 150 families with computers. As of September, the Banc had already given away 150, and Dr. Verhulst estimated 250-300 would likely be donated by the end of the year.

Finding out information like that is a usual task for Dr. Verhulst, associate professor of Statistics and Research Consulting in the Department of Medical Education at SIU School of Medicine.

Working with departments throughout the university, Dr. Verhulst has developed data for clinical researchers, basic science researchers, nursing programs, and others for projects and grants covering topics such as obesity and asthma, infant mortality and thoracic surgery. The Illinois State Museum, the Illinois State Library, and even television stations have requested his expertise in statistics to help them decipher or gather information. He is one of four statisticians at SIU who work on more than 300 projects every year.

“I like the variety,” Dr. Verhulst says. “I’ve learned about diabetes and observed an open heart surgery; I like working with new people and new projects.” Learning about the projects helps him work with the statistics. “The School’s mission includes education, research and service. My office touches all those areas.”

Tables, graphs, data sets, medians, standard deviations, t-tests, chi-square tests — these esoteric terms help

physicians read medical literature critically and with ease. Dr. Verhulst trains students to take a critical eye to medical literature, which helps them practice better evidence-based medicine. “Steve has an uncanny ability to understand the clinical picture in a way that I wish I could understand all of the statistical components of the study,” says Teresa Boley, R.N., MSN, assistant professor of clinical surgery.

Originally a psychology major, Dr. Verhulst says he got into statistics accidentally as an undergraduate at the University of Wisconsin. “I took a stat class, and I was good at it. Grad students kept finding me to help them, so I kept taking stat classes.”

After getting his master’s degree, he joined SIU School of Medicine in 1979 and has crunched the numbers ever since. One ongoing project is a follow up questionnaire for graduates in their residency programs. He queries feedback both from the programs about the residents, and from the graduates about how well they were prepared for residency. “We’ve found that, clinically, our graduates are very well prepared. But often the residents are harder on themselves than their programs are on them,” Dr. Verhulst says.

Not only does Dr. Verhulst track the students as they leave SIU School of Medicine, but he is an integral part of bringing them to campus. For 13 years, he has been head of the admissions committee and the experience is near and dear to his heart. “I have fun meeting the applicants,” he says. “The well-rounded SIU package sells the applicant.”

He also teaches second-, third- and fourth-year students about statistics in medical research. “Some students don’t see a need for it, but by the time they’re in their fourth year, they recognize its value.” He adds that many residency programs are requiring research projects, so statistics are needed.

“Statistics help makes decisions from uncertainty,” he says. “It’s going from many to one — all based on probability: is what I see over and above chance or can it be explained another way?”

This statistician has a unique perspective about computers, not just as a tool to help researchers find answers to scientific hypotheses, but as a necessity for a 10-year-old with ADHD to do her writing assignment. He is happy to help researchers tackle their statistical analysis but is just as content sorting goods for the Computer Banc garage sale. He handles both with a close eye for detail, and as an opportunity to help make a connection. ■