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On the road with the 'Geeks': Helping hapless computer owners

By JON W. GLASS, The Virginian-Pilot
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Ernie Stallcop, left, and Paul Phelps are co-owners of several 1-800-905-GEEK franchises, which are Geeks On Call operations. This small building behind Stallcop's house serves as their Chesapeake office. Bill Tiernan/TheVirginian-Pilot

CHESAPEAKE — After a string of 12- and 16-hour days, Paul Phelps expected a slow morning. But as the computer tech drove to his business partner's backyard work shed in Deep Creek, a call from corporate quickly changed that.

A woman in Smithfield faced an emergency, and this one seemed more urgent than usual.

The phone call came in a little after 8 a.m. on a cold Thursday late last month. The woman, environmental consultant Rita Dorward, planned to fly to New England early that coming Monday to meet with a business client. Her laptop computer, which she needed for an important presentation, was freezing up and crashing. Dorward couldn't open some important documents and feared she might lose them.

She needed help — now.

"Better get rolling," Phelps told his partner, Ernie Stallcop.

For Phelps, 49, a retired Navy chief electronics technician, dealing with panicky customers is routine. He and Stallcop, 51, a former Navy torpedoman, are certified computer geeks – and proud of it.

Together, they own or manage four of Norfolk-based Geeks On Call America's 10 Hampton Roads franchises.

In their signature Chrysler PT Cruisers – rolling billboards emblazoned with the company's new brand name, "1-800-905-GEEK" – they cover a territory that sprawls from the North Carolina line to Ocean View in Norfolk and to points west of Franklin. In a typical year, each of them rolls up 18,000 to 30,000 miles.

For a price – starting at \$99 to show up and offer a diagnosis – they will come to your home or business and clean up viruses, reformat and load balky operating systems and tackle the multitude of other software and hardware glitches that befuddle low-tech consumers buying increasingly high-tech computers and digital accessories.

But they don't promise miracles.

When Phelps walked into Rita Dorward's living room, after a 40-minute haul to Smithfield, it appeared the Geeks might have to do a little walking on water. He listened as Dorward described the "weird stuff" her \$3,000 laptop was doing. Most ominous was the "blue screen of death," an error warning that, in the worst case, means a computer's hard drive is going bad.

"The timing of this couldn't have been worse," Dorward said.

Phelps quickly sized up the situation. The laptop's data should be backed up and the operating system reformatted and reloaded, he told her – a fairly routine task, but with a hitch. He'd have to charge his \$100 hourly rate to do the work in her home, since much of the eight hours it can take for those services is dead time for a tech. Also, he warned, other problems might surface, requiring more time.

The much cheaper alternative, he said, would be for him to take the computer back to Stallcop's work shed in Chesapeake and do the job for a flat \$225 fee, plus \$50 to save the data. The "sad thing," he added, was that depending on workload, there could be a three- to five-day turnaround.

Unfortunately, Dorward didn't have that kind of time.

Trying to sound encouraging, Phelps phoned his partner back at the shop. Stallcop already was handling one rush job for a Navy captain preparing for a command change.

"I'm going to put you on the spot," Phelps told him. "If I brought a laptop to you today, could you have it ready for drop-off on Saturday?"

When local entrepreneur Richard Cole co-founded Geeks On Call in 1999, he helped pioneer what today has become a legion of "geeks," "nerds" and "medics" across the country who specialize in home and small-business computer service. That's why Cole last year decided to "rebrand" the company as 1-800-905-GEEK, using a phone number to distinguish itself from copycats.

Since the company began selling franchises in 2001, Geeks On Call has spread to 34 major U.S. metropolitan areas and 22 states, with more than 300 franchisees buzzing down highways in PT Cruisers.

Cole, the company's chief executive officer and board chairman, expects those franchises to generate \$25 million to \$30 million in revenue in 2007. He also expects to sell 75 to 150 more franchises in the year ahead and anticipates expanding the brand for the first time outside the United States, into Canada and the United Kingdom.

About 60 people work in the corporate headquarters on Kempsville Road. That includes around 30 call-center operators who field calls from frustrated computer users nationwide and then, based on ZIP codes, schedule appointments with the nearest franchise.

"It seemed there was a niche that needed filling," Cole said. "It's frustrating trying to enjoy the technology but not being able to use it."

With more households than ever owning personal computers, and more adding big-screen TVs and other digital products, demand for in-home repair service is only expected to grow, said Kurt Scherf, vice president and principal analyst with Parks Associates, a Dallas market research firm.

"We have a generation of consumers, or at least a segment," he said, "that have more money than time – or patience – to solve these problems."

Scherf estimated that businesses doing in-home computer repairs are generating annual revenue of \$250 million to \$500 million. As much as two-thirds of that market, he said, is held by Geek Squad, a company bought out by Best Buy in 2002 that now operates out of the retailer's more than 800 stores nationwide.

Phelps and Stallcop consider the Geek Squad techies, in their trademark Volkswagen Beetles and clip-on ties, the main competition, even though more than a dozen companies pitch in-home computer repair in South Hampton Roads phone book listings.

With technology becoming more complicated, the computer repair industry represented by the Geeks is moving beyond the "break-fix role," Scherf said. "They're becoming a trusted digital-home adviser."

That's the way Tom Petry, owner of a Norfolk greenhouse and nursery, sees it. He and his wife pay Phelps and Stallcop about \$100 a month under a service plan to maintain the Petrys' four computers.

"Computers have become like cars," Petry said. "You need somebody to maintain them or they're not going to work like they should. The big thing is when you need your computer, you've got to have it."

On the drive to Dorward's house, Phelps experienced technical troubles of his own. To navigate the labyrinth of roads in his territory, he bought a satellite-based Global Positioning System for his Cruiser that speaks directions. But after a software update he recently loaded, the GPS wasn't picking up the signals.

No problem. He pulled off the road halfway to Smithfield, grabbed his laptop and clicked on his "Streets and Trips" mapping software. He double-checked the route and was on his way.

"That's one thing you learn in computers – always have a back up," he said.

Phelps and Stallcop met eight years ago, when both had children in the Deep Creek High School marching band. They discovered a mutual love of computers.

At work, they wear khaki pants and dark blue shirts with their names and the Geek's logo stitched on. They both wear wire-rim glasses.

On the road, their Cruisers become mobile offices. Phelps stores drinks in a cooler on the floorboard and props his laptop on the passenger seat, for driving directions and to keep tabs on appointments called in from corporate. A wireless Bluetooth headset juts from his ear, to field calls hands-free.

On a typical day, Phelps takes five service calls – his first at 9 a.m. and his last at 6 p.m. Stallcop handles three calls, spending the rest of his day in the shop. They recently hired a new technician, hoping to cut back on the extra hours they'd been logging.

A majority of their service calls are for problems caused by some type of spyware or adware picked up while Web surfing, Phelps said. These issues include sluggish Internet performance, unwanted pop-up ads, and getting hijacked from a regular Web home page to an X-rated site.

Other calls might be for something as simple as restoring an Internet connection. Hooking up a wireless computer network also is becoming more popular. The Geeks can resolve most of the glitches in a person's house within an hour or two, at an average cost of around \$225.

But for about 20 percent of the problems they encounter, Stallcop's shop is a better way to go – as in Dorward's case.

After reassuring the Smithfield consultant that his partner would try to get her laptop back by 6 p.m. Saturday, Phelps left with her computer and headed back to Chesapeake.

As it turned out, no major complications surfaced on the laptop. Stallcop saved and backed up all of Dorward's files and data, then reformatted the hard drive and installed a clean copy of the Windows operating system. He also loaded the latest version of Microsoft Office.

Stallcop delivered the like-new laptop to Dorward's door about 5:15 p.m. Saturday, two days later. Total price: \$300.

Dorward declared herself "thrilled to death." Otherwise, she would have been out buying a new computer.

"I just wanted to take them to dinner," she said. "They're not cheap, but for what those guys did, I think they need to raise their rates."

Score another one for the Geeks.

Reach Jon W. Glass at (757) 446-2318 or jon.glass@pilotonline.com.

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