

A hard drive turns into a soft sell

■ A York man resurrects his dream in a downtown electronics shop.

By MICHAEL CODY
Daily Record staff

Peering into the picture window at 23 1/2 S. Beaver St. in York, a passer-by sees this:

■ A radio-controlled car, a digital turntable, a Beta tape player and a Tandy computer, priced variously from \$15 to \$500.

■ Stacks of modems and two dozen computer cases lined up like library books.

■ Piles of cards used to upgrade motherboards — some in their original packaging, some not.

If it's a weekday, 22-year-old Manuel Manning is on duty as DSD Electronics' sales manager. If it's a Saturday or a holiday, Darnell Smith is behind the sales counter, assembling another computer from parts cast off by others.

Smith, 34, opened the store a month ago and co-owns it with his wife, Dorothea, and his father. He may ask as little as \$75 for a secondhand computer that runs Windows 3.1; from the right customer, he may accept as little as \$10.

"You really can't let a person who's interested not have a computer," Smith said. To do so, he said, risks wasting such a person's potential.

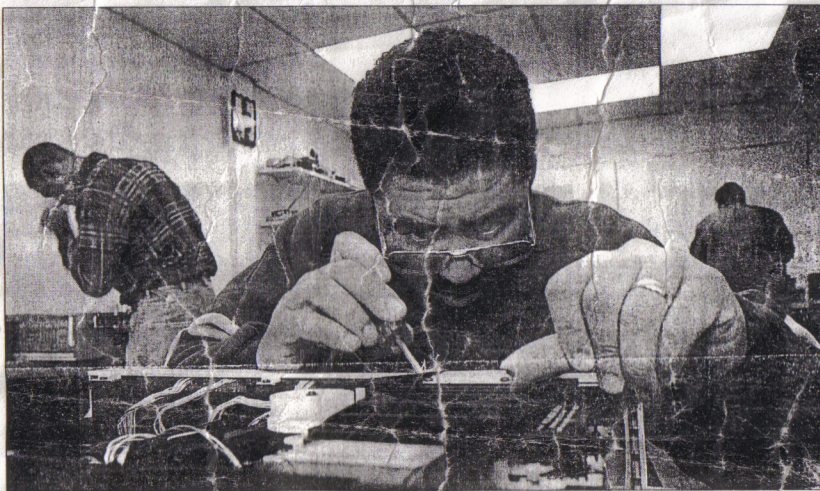
On the subject of poverty, Smith has some experience.

By his own account, he grew up in a poor family. Twelve years ago, with a wife and sick child to support, he was living in public housing and on welfare.

"I loved going into stores like Goodwill and The (York Rescue) Mission," Smith said. The problem: "I was a technology nut. I never could find stuff I liked."

Having quit a job as a cabinet-maker, Smith wore out his car delivering pizza. He hoped for permanent work with Thonet Industries in York but, when an employee was killed in an on-the-job accident, the plant shut down.

It was rejection, finally, that changed Smith's luck.



Darnell Smith, a self-professed 'technology nut,' works on a CD player Saturday at his shop, DSD Electronics, in downtown York. He opened the store last month with help from his wife and father.

Having invented an electronic device, he took it to the York County Chamber of Commerce in hopes of finding an investor. Chamber staff members advised him politely, Smith recalls, that he lacked expertise.

At their suggestion, he borrowed enough money to enroll in an associate's degree program at the York Technical Institute; before graduating, he got a job with Pincor Electronics at almost \$10 an hour.

"I almost had a heart attack," Smith said. "This was like, 'I'm rich.'"

Later, he was promoted to writing software in Pincor's research and development division. The software was used in automating heavy machinery, Smith said — "big old scary stuff."

One day, he said, "the hardware and the software merged in my mind." From then on, Smith

believed he could marry computers to almost any process.

"If you could do it by hand," he said, "you could do it with a computer."

Smith took a job with Black & Decker in Towson, Md., automating tests of appliances and power tools the company manufactured. With friends from work, he taught computer classes in the Baltimore area.

In The Little Red Schoolhouse in York, Smith opened an electronics consignment store. On weekends, on a blank wall in one part of the store, he showed G-rated movies to children; at other times, the theater became an arcade.

Smith attached a pair of 300-watt amplifiers to an advanced Amiga computer, then pointed a \$2,800 projector at a blank wall so his customers could play video games on a drive-in movie scale.

"When you blew stuff up, you knew it," Smith said. "The whole building knew it."

"People still ask about it," said Manning, DSD's sales manager. "Isn't your brother the one with the world's biggest arcade?"

The project — along with Smith's first marriage — collapsed two years ago. When he returned from a Black & Decker assignment in Mexico, a good portion of his inventory was gone.

"I ceased to function," Smith said. He remarried a few months ago, however. His father, Moses Smith, suggested that the couple re-open the store; Manning, who was living in Chambersburg, agreed to help out.

So, with his friends from work, Smith set about collecting old computers. Some he bought at auction; the rest from companies that were trading up.

"That computer is no different

than (on) the day it was made," Smith said. "It's no less powerful. It's just people who have gotten more impatient."

Besides, he said, if someone buys a \$2,000 computer and doesn't use it, it's just an expensive door stop.

On a board by the entrance to DSD Electronics, Smith listed the services he would provide:

■ Computer repairs and upgrades.

■ Installation of software and local-area networks.

■ Assembly of new machines.

■ Computer training.

The result, he said, is less like CompUSA than a yard sale under roof.

"We wanted to provide a store," Smith said, "where people . . . who don't have a lot of money can come and get good stuff."