

"You have to think. . . . You have to think."

Paul Stewart snapped the words like a drill sergeant yesterday over the heads of about a dozen youngsters hunched over computer screens in a small, crowded room at the Rainier Recreation Center in Seattle's Rainier Valley.

The youngsters were struggling through a test on putting together a simple spreadsheet.

"You have to use your own analytical thinking," advised the 33-year-old former sergeant, who learned and taught about computers in the Army.

If it wasn't for Stewart, these inner-city youngsters might not have known a spreadsheet from a bedsheet.

But thanks to the fact that Stewart, now an information-tracking specialist for a hazardous waste-disposal firm, heard a radio public-service announcement for volunteers to help at the recreation center, they and other Rainier Valley

low-income-family youngsters are becoming computer literate.

Stewart, who settled in Kent after he was discharged from the Army in 1990, said, "I noticed there weren't too many educational opportunities for inner-city kids."

So he packed up his own computer, brought it to the recreation center last June and began voluntarily teaching three sessions of free Saturday computer classes, the last one between 10 p.m. and 1 a.m. as part of the Parks and Recreation Department's late-night recreation program aimed at high-risk youngsters.

"I used my own computer from about the end of June until December when I started to get corporate support," the New Orleans native said.

Gil Petitt, a Boeing Co. internal auditor, helped drum up the corporate backing. A member of the recreation center's advisory council, he took over the chore of project manager for what was dubbed "Project Compute."

Armed with an endorsement letter from Seattle Parks Superintendent Holly Miller, they obtained a donation of 10 used IBM-compatible personal computers from the Boeing Co. and a Macintosh computer from Stewart's employer, Burlington Environmental Inc.

Parks Department electricians put in the necessary wiring.

Local software and computer outlets contributed software.

"I hope to get an education in computers because I want to become a lawyer," said 12-year-old Sheba Taylor, who lives in the Yesler Terrace housing project. She said she wants to look up her cases on the screen, not in a file drawer.

A week ago Friday the youngsters showed off their computer skills for their parents at an open house. The show included problem-solving by teams, which Stewart encourages.

"If we finish it (a problem), he gives us a point," said Jojo Norton, 11, one of the team captains.

Thirteen-year-old Phuc Dang, another team captain, said he plans to graduate to an advanced computer class Stewart is planning after this quarter is over.

Top graduate this quarter will receive a computer as a prize, Stewart said.

Stewart has developed a curriculum with frequent testing. A youngster cannot advance to the next level unless he or she scores 70 percent on a test.

Besides an introduction to spreadsheets, Stewart teaches about databases, graphics, word-processing and disk-operating systems.

Petitt said they have asked Mayor Norm Rice to issue certificates to the youngsters who successfully

complete the course.

A bachelor, Stewart recently dropped the late-night classes.

"That was messing up my social life big-time," he said.

Petitt and Stewart said they need volunteer instructors, equipment, software and financial support. Stewart hopes some of the students eventually can become instructors.

"We've got some software that won't run on our old machines," Petitt said. He said that they also need help to maintain the equipment and cash donations to insure it.

To volunteer, or donate equipment call the Rainier Recreation Center, 386-1919, or the Project Compute hotline, 781-5777.

Maureen O'Neill, the Parks Department's Southeast region recreation manager, said officials are enthused by the opportunity Stewart is affording low-income children.

"Paul is also teaching leadership, motivation and competition, which are skills necessary in the business world," O'Neill said.

Stewart is a disciplinarian.

"In my opinion discipline is very much needed in the education system, especially in the technical arena," Stewart said.

"There is no room for error. If you give them strong standards at the outset, it will carry them through the rest of their lives.