

Our day as syslab students

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Rows of computers line the walls, frantic students rush around and the constant low hum of the supercomputer can be heard through the glass windows. A sign on the glass reads, "Please feed the sysadmins or we may eat your accounts. Yum."

As we take in the surroundings, math and computer science teacher Shane Torbert shows us a sneak preview of Intranet 2, scheduled to launch later that day.

"Everything's breaking!" said Torbert, as he shows us the new preferences page. "It's not supposed to break. Andrew Smith!"

Senior Andrew Smith hurries over to our side and proceeds to fix the problem. Many syslab students are steeped in work with Iodine,

as Intranet 2 is fondly called, just hours away from its May 17 premiere.

Intranet 2 and its precursor were both begun as senior projects. Seniors Eric Harmon, Bryan Rau-Jacobs, Andrew Deason and Smith are currently working on Intranet 2 as their techlab project.

The syslab is one of 12 senior techlabs offered at Jefferson. While its students work on diverse computer-related tasks, many students go to the syslab much before their senior year. Many students "gravitate to the syslab," as syslab director Randy Latimer put it, not necessarily to work on their techlab project, but also to work on other tasks.

"I've been here since freshman year," said Smith. "I liked it because it used Linux."

"People who are admins make everything work," said junior Logan Kearsley. "Everyone else just hangs out here because it's cool."

On entering the syslab, one is greeted by two prominent rows of computers. Usually seated at a table between the rows, Latimer is in the center of all the action but rarely intervenes as the students go about their work.

Latimer took us on a tour of the room containing the supercomputer, which lay behind glass windows. He explained over the din of the processors that the room contained servers that helped run behind-the-scenes functions. But what would happen if something goes wrong? "We try not to think of that," said Latimer, smiling.

Back outside the supercomputer room, Latimer explained, no longer speaking in an abnormally loud voice, that the processors were very pricey. "They serve the school, not just the syslab," he said.

The syslab students are often subject to stereotypes. According to senior Dan Tran, these include "breathing fresh air will kill us, we would rather spend time with a computer than with a member of the opposite sex... we have no interpersonal [or] communications skills. I could go on, but I'm sure you can fill in the rest."

In reality, however, many syslab students are actually heavily involved in other extracur-

ricular activities. "I'd say somewhere around 25% to 50% actually fit parts of what I said," said Tran, "[but] most of us are actually normal people. Many actually have a social life of some sort."

Several students agree that the syslab has changed since a few years ago. "We took down some of the boards on the walls,

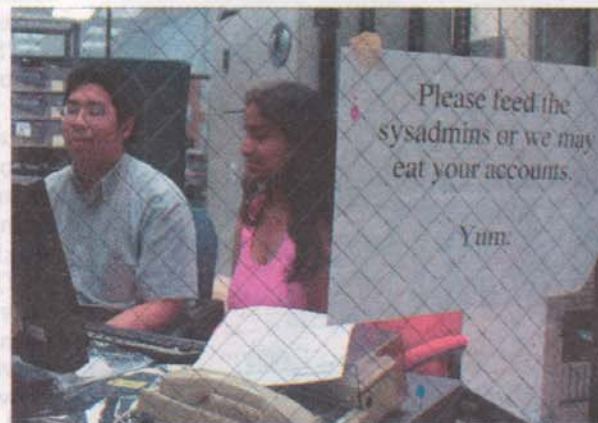


photo by Natasha Singh

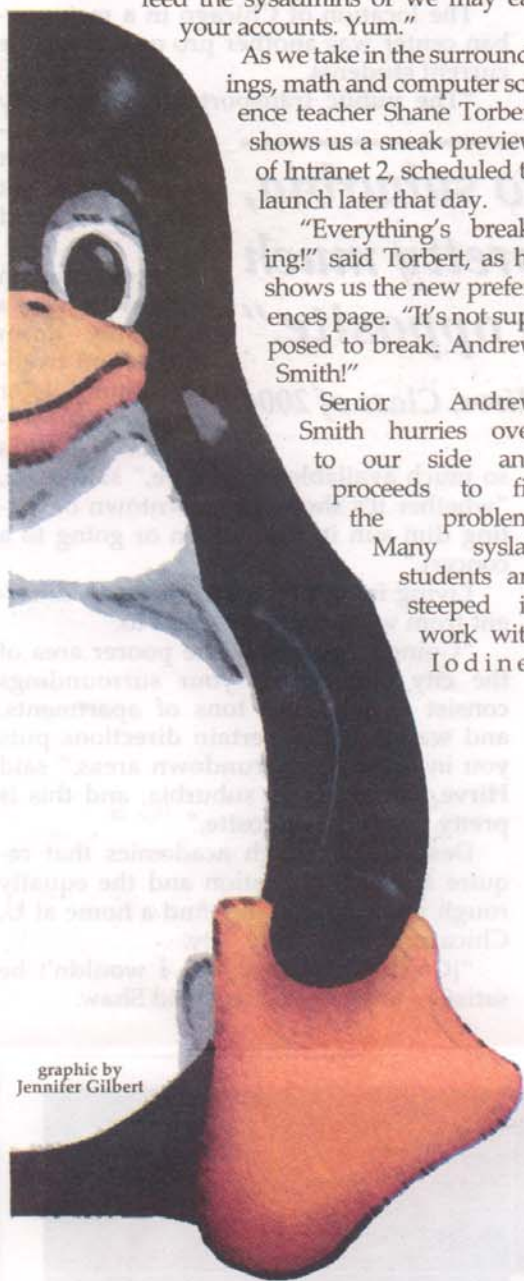
Senior Dan "The Intranet Man" Tran and News Editor Pratima Gopalakrishnan work on a program in the supercomputer lab during eighth period.

and we actually have windows and sunlight now," said Deason. "I suppose that's a good change, although many people think some of the syslab people are allergic to natural light."

"When I first came here, there seemed to be a little intimidation factor," said Latimer, "but now [the syslab is] much more available... We are trying to encourage more people to be able to use this [facility]."

The sense of urgency was palpable in the air on May 17. Yet the students shared a lighter moment as they showed us a blank sheet of printer paper and proclaimed that it did, in fact, contain actual code. Seeing our disbelief, they opened a file on the computer and showed us the program, which consisted exclusively of spaces and line breaks.

"Some are working on actual work, others are checking their email/Intranet/etc., and some are standing crowded around one screen looking at something interesting," said Tran.



graphic by Jennifer Gilbert