

by Herb Jackson

Leonia High School helped make the Baltic Sea nation of Estonia one of the most Internet-reliant in the world, Estonian President Toomas Hendrik Ilves says.

How? By including Ilves, who grew up in Leonia, in an experimental four-year math program that featured computer programming. The training paid off when the son of Estonian refugees enrolled at Columbia University in 1972 and took part in the work-study program to help pay his tuition.

While others in work-study had menial jobs in the cafeteria, Ilves was a programmer. That opportunity for advancement was on his mind when, in 1996, he worked with the government of a newly independent Estonia to build an education system with a heavy focus on computers.

"I realized what my country needs is people who know how to use computers. I was the author of a proposal to computerize the schools, and we had them all online by 1997," Ilves, 54, said last week in an interview at the Estonian Embassy in Washington.

Estonia had almost no modern infrastructure, and no banks, when the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991. Today, two-thirds of Estonian people use the Internet, and citizens vote, propose laws to the parliament and conduct 97 percent of bank transactions online.

"That Estonia is one of the most Interneted countries is due to Mrs. Cummings' programming class," Ilves said, referring to his teacher, Christine Cummings.

Now retired, Cummings remembered Ilves as bright and witty.

"Not only was he a wonderful math student and computer student, he was an all-around student: history, language arts. He was a wonderful speaker. He had it all," she said.

The math program was developed and funded by federal grants through Columbia, where Cummings had gotten her master's degree. Discontinued after the funding ran out, it included a heavy focus on critical thinking and problem-solving, using the comparatively rudimentary computers of the day to attack math problems.

Today, Ilves applies those critical thinking skills as Estonia's head of state. He is responsible for the nation's foreign affairs, including military participation in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The prime minister runs the domestic government.

Ilves and President Bush held a joint news conference in 2006 when Bush visited Estonia, and the two met again at the White House in June. Before sitting down with The Record last week, he met with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Vice President Dick Cheney to discuss, among other topics, Estonia's concerns about Russian aggression toward another former Soviet republic, Georgia.

It's a long way from the streets of North Jersey, and Ilves rolls his eyes when asked how he got there.

"I really don't know," he says at first, then goes into his life story.

After graduating Columbia and getting a master's degree from the University of Pennsylvania, he worked for a while as a teacher at the Open Education Center in Englewood, then as director of an arts center in Vancouver, British Columbia.

He was lecturing and writing about Estonia at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver in 1984 when he got an offer to work for Radio Free Europe, the United States-funded agency broadcasting news into Eastern bloc countries.

Ilves had learned to speak Estonian from his parents, who settled in New Jersey when Ilves was 3, having met as exiles in Sweden.

His father, now deceased, worked for a paper company. His mother was a librarian in Leonia's elementary school. Now retired, she travels back and forth between her native country and New Jersey, he said.

His knowledge of the language and the issues in the region - he grew up hearing his parents and fellow exiles who would visit voice their anger about the Soviet occupation during World War II - made him attractive to Radio Free Europe.

But he wasn't sure he wanted the job.

"I said, well, at least I'll get a free plane ticket to see my brother," Ilves said. Andres, who had also grown up in Leonia was living in Europe.

By 1988, Ilves was running the Estonian desk at Radio Free Europe, and Estonians were beginning to test the limits of Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's new openness policy of glasnost.

Part of the revolt against Soviet rule involved mass gatherings to sing patriotic songs. An independent film released this year, "The Singing Revolution," describes how organizers spread the word about some gatherings through Radio Free Europe.

After independence, Ilves was asked to join the government. In 1993 he became ambassador to North America.

"I was one of the few people who knew something about Estonia and the United States who did

not have a background in the KGB," he said. "I had to renounce my United States citizenship, and take a tenfold cut in pay."

In 1996, he was called back home and became foreign minister. In 2006, he was chosen president by the electoral assembly in a vote of 174-162.

Dealing with Russia remains a challenge for Estonians. About one-fourth of the population is Russian, largely because of efforts in the Soviet era to settle ethnic Russians in other republics to dilute the republics' identities.

When the Estonian government removed a Red Army monument from the capital of Tallinn last summer, some Russian-speaking people rioted. Estonia became the target of a "cyber-attack" that froze or crashed many of the nation's Internet service providers. Banks were, and Ilves said the attacks originated from Russia. He has worked to convince NATO that the alliance must provide support to member nations that come under such attacks, just as it is committed to supporting victims of military attacks.

Bush credited Ilves with helping to educate him about the subject when they met in June.

"We also talked about an interesting subject, and one that I can learn a lot about, and that is the cyber attack that makes us all vulnerable," Bush said after the meeting. "I really want to thank you for your leadership, and thank you for your clear understanding of the dangers that that imposes not only on your country, but mine and others, as well."

Ilves, for his part, thanks Leonia.

"It was a great place to grow up, with a great school system and kids who were highly motivated," he said. "Part of it was the quality of the teaching, but a large part of it was the quality of the competition."

- 1972: Valedictorian, Leonia High School.
- 1976: Bachelor's degree, psychology, Columbia University.
- 1978: Master's degree, psychology, University of Pennsylvania.
- 1979-81: Assistant director and English teacher, Open Education Center, Englewood.
- 1981-83: Director and administrator of art, Vancouver Arts Center, British Columbia.
- 1983-84: Lecturer in Estonian literature and linguistics, Simon Fraser University, Vancouver.

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