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Looking Down the Y2K Barrel

by Dan Skeen

"Jesus!" Greg Merideth suddenly shouts during our phone interview. "Hold on one second." In the background, frantic noise: "What happened? Take it down! Restart it." A second later, he's back on the phone. "We had a small crash here," he says.

It's midday and he's been working since 11 a.m. the day before. At one point, he asks what day it is; later he asks whether it's November or December. Like the ominous flashing on your VCR, only one date is stamped in his mind: 1:1:2000.

This is job stress, Y2K style.

Over the last several months he and his ragged six-man band at Bloomfield, N.J.'s Universal Computer Labs have evolved from a group of programmers into an elite Y2K SWAT unit.

They've killed more glitches and applied more patches than a squad of Israeli commandos. The office is a battleground strewn with computer casings, pizza boxes and empty Coke bottles. Hammocks dangle from the ceiling and cots are pushed against the walls.

In their race against the new millennium, the outside world, even family, has faded into the background. Technical Analyst Tim Craney's 8-year-old son now drops by the office after school — they chat as Tim pounds out code on a keyboard. Since marrying six months ago, analyst Brian Christmas' unfestive work schedule has earned him "non-stop flak" from his new bride. She also visits him at work to, as Merideth says, "keep that family thing going."

After a few months on Y2K detail, the

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group realized stress outlets were essential. When buggy code strings induce computer rage, co-workers force the incensed member to take a half-hour break. Sometimes geek-attacks sneak up too fast. Merideth has twice punched monitors, once breaking the screen and cutting his hand.

Now two punching bags hang from overhead beams. The second was installed after the portly project manager hit one so hard it cracked the beam above. He claims he punched it, but rumor says he tackled it like a linebacker on PCP. As for the broken beam, "We'll have to fix it in February," Merideth says.

In a more meditative vein, the group created the black room. Lined floor to ceiling with black felt, the small room offers a sightless, but more importantly, soundless experience — a brief refuge from the insidious hum of their computer opponents.

Between the black room, family visits and George Foreman therapy, they keep stress from shutting them down. While the holiday season won't be this crazy for most of us, it is a time when stress relief is essential. We've put together some simple and painless [office relaxation methods](#) — no felt or heavy bags required.

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