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Program will help stimulate young minds

By RON FANFAIR

Canada's fourth largest auto insurer has announced that it will provide funding of close to \$20,000 over the next year for 11 United Way of Greater Toronto-supported agencies in the city to receive licenses to use the Ashaware Afrocentric software.

State Farm Insurance, United Way of Greater Toronto and Black Board International which develops the software, launched the Stimulating Our Minds Always (SOMA) project last week at Tropicana Community Services centre in Scarborough.

The neighbourhood-based initiative, focused on youths ranging in ages from 3-18, is aimed at improving reading and computer literacy skills while building self-esteem through awareness of Black culture and history.

Black Board International chief executive officer Warren Salmon said it's appropriate that the initiative was launched during Black History Month because Black history forms the core of the software content.

The company has provided culturally-related educational software and services for use at home and in educational institutions for the past 16 years. The programs have been matched with various provincial and state curriculum standards and have been recommended for use at school levels.

"I applaud State Farm and United Way for recognizing the value of our software which has been designed to address many of the challenges facing Toronto through its emphasis on positive role models and history-related content," said Salmon.

"Hopefully, other corporate entities will follow State Farm's lead and partner with us to help deliver the programs that are designed to educate, motivate and stimulate."

State Farm's vice-president of operations, Barbara Bellissimo, said her company was proud to be associated with a community project aimed at local kids and youths.

"We have a longstanding tradition of supporting our communities with safety and educational programs," she said. "Being a good neighbour means actively supporting and improving our communities. By focusing on our children and youth, we are building for the future."

United Way of Greater Toronto board member Earl Miller said his organization's work with youth is at the core of its commitment to make real change in the city, particularly in neighbourhoods in the inner suburbs.

"We hope the fruits of this partnership will engage African Canadian youth in their rich heritage and encourage them to further explore the important contributions of Black people," added Miller, a former executive coordinator with the Ontario Race Relations Directorate.

The participating agencies are Community on the Move, Dixon Neighbourhood Youth Centre, East Metro Youth Services, East Scarborough Boys and Girls Club, Jane-Finch Community and Family Centre, Jamaican Canadian Association,

Rathburn Area Youth, Regent Park Pathways to Education, St. Stephen's Youth Arcade, Tropicana Community Services and Warden Woods Community Centre.