

Fry's
Fry's Electronics
San Jose, California
8127 P.O.

WELCOME TO Fry's
ELECTRONICS
San Jose, California
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ELECTRONICS

THE FUTURE OF RETAIL

A WIRED SPECIAL REPORT

BY BOB PARKS PHOTOGRAPHS BY MICHAEL SEXTON

It's one of the few in-jokes in Silicon Valley: With stores decorated as Egyptian pyramids and Mayan temples, the Fry's Electronics experience is part Disney and part S/M dungeon - product spectacle paired with famously antagonistic customer service.

If Noah were charged with preserving each thing touched by technology, he could start at the Fry's locations around San Jose, rounding up RAM chips, potato chips, motherboards, computer magazines, ice-cream bars, blenders, DVD players, and at least a dozen kinds of scientifically freeze-dried jerky. Cheap.

Yet picking through Fry's aisles isn't for mere mall rats. The store is a proving ground, with each shopper taking away a new high tech toy as if it were a trophy fish at the local sun 'n' fun derby. Fry's customers on a weekend afternoon are families,

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entrepreneurs, retirees, and bored teenagers all looking for a challenge. "Sometimes we buy games," says an adventuresome shopper named Chris. "Usually what we buy is little hardware pieces to make other little hardware pieces fit together." In a region where almost everyone knows something about technology, the game is to push through crowds of other shoppers and stump the US\$6-an-hour sales staff. The clerks have grown surly after facing wiseass Valley engineers all week, and they're either aloof or too aggressive with Saturday's easy prey. The deal closes with a security shakedown on the way out - shopping bags meticulously reconciled against receipts. And if you hope to bring back a defective item, *Wired's* informal poll indicates that the hoops-and-hurdles return policy can cause an exchange to drag on all afternoon.

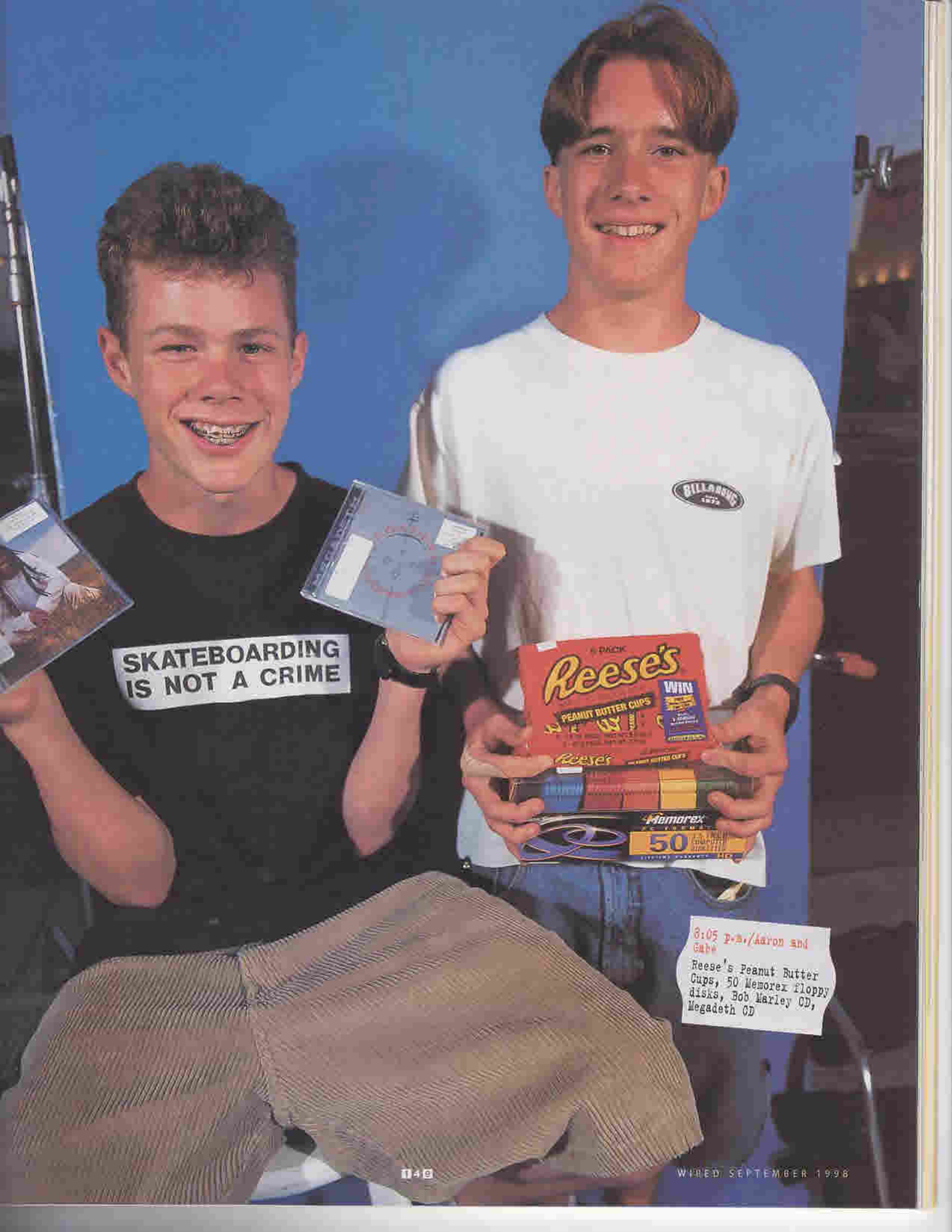
These are the survivors. Here's what they got. ■ ■ ■



5:05 p.m./Maye
64-kbyte, 72-pin SIMM
"My company has a package that uses VR like Neal Stephenson talked about in Snow Crash."



9:09 P.M./Dominique
Backup battery for laptop, wire connectors, York Peppermint Patty, fabric-pill remover
"There's so much aggravation in there."



SKATEBOARDING IS NOT A CRIME

BILLBOARD

REESE'S PEANUT BUTTER CUPS
WIN
MEMOREX 50

8:05 p.m./Aaron and Gabo
Reese's Peanut Butter Cups, 50 Memorex floppy disks, Bob Marley CD, Megadeth CD

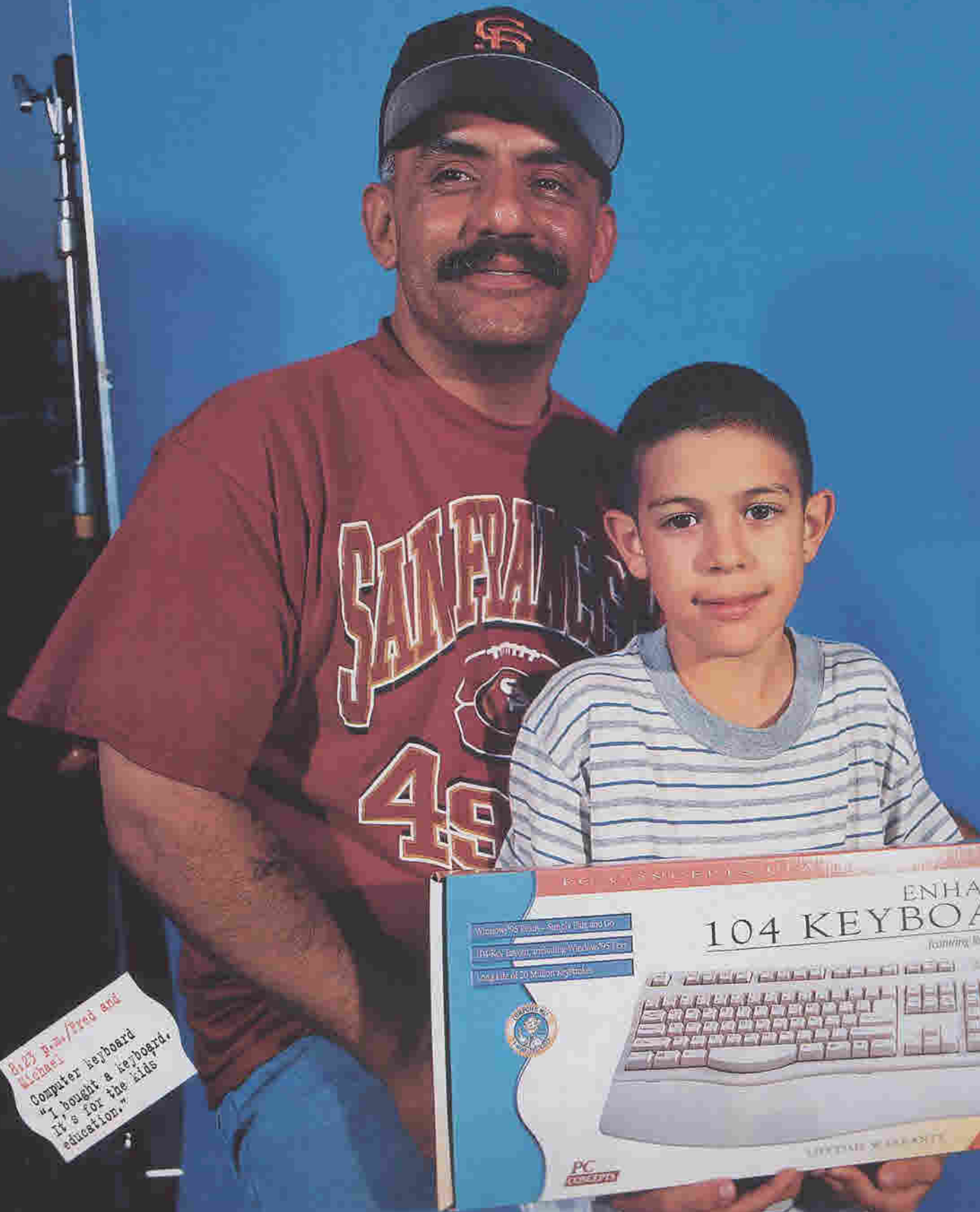


7:17 p.m./Mary, John,
Tiffany, and Timothy
Atomic Bomberman
videogame, 8-mm Sony
camcorder
Mary: "We came for the
camcorder and bought
the videogame."



4:01 p.m./Charles

Compaq Presario computer monitor
"It's not really a home computer. We live in an RV."



0.23 Fred/Fred and Michael
Computer keyboard
"I bought a keyboard.
It's for the kids
education."

PC RECEIPTS OF THE YEAR

ENHANCE
104 KEYBOARD
(Learning Keyboard)

Windows 95 Tested... Sun's 3rd and 4th
Dr. PC's Exam, annually Windows 95 Test
100% Life of 20 Million Keyboards

PC
COMPUTER

LIFETIME WARRANTY