

Prelude: Steppin’

We live our lives in years, swift, flying, transient years. We hold the possible future in our hands but not by wish and will, only by thought, plan, knowledge, and organization. If the college can pour into the coming age an American Negro who knows himself and his plight and how to protect himself and fight race prejudice, then the world of our dreams will come true and not otherwise. —W.E.B DuBois (1933)

The preceding quote by DuBois was taken from a speech he gave during the era of segregation entitled, “The Field and Function of the Negro College.” However, its essence still rings true even for these days. From the above quote I drew the title of my first discourse on the W.E.B. DuBois Learning Center, *Future In Our Hands*. It is also where I selected the title of this discourse (written as a memoir) about the Learning Center’s Telecommunication Hub (Telehub) Network.

In the first part of this memoir I discuss how the Telehub Network came about. And the appearance of versions of the word “step” in the titles connotes this. In the later part I engage in reflections, introspections and projections pertaining to its purpose, motivations and possibilities. All-in-all, I hope to show how the Telehub evolved (as did the DuBois Learning Center itself) from the desires of African Americans “who knew themselves” and were comfortable and confident enough in their abilities, skills and talents to initiate the actions that could quite possibly help lead to the *World Of Our Dreams*.

From small seeds, tall oak trees grow. This is also true for organizations and systems. The Telehub Network project of the W.E.B. DuBois Learning Center (DLC) is an example of this phenomenon. It began as a germ of an idea, which in turn led to the seed of a concept, which eventually grew into the tree of an institution. One of the branches of that tree is the DLC’s Telehub Network.

At the time of the Telehub’s inception, the Learning Center had been in operation for over twenty years. Both the DLC and the Telehub Network were initiated and developed by utilizing a network of friends, family, co-workers, etc., as will be shown. And as it grew, it attracted others desiring to participate. In this endeavor I hope to illustrate that old adage that “you organize people around projects.” And that those projects should be something that people need and/or want. That being said, I think it would be best if I begin this memoir with how I was led to help with the planting and nurturing of the Learning Center’s seed.

In the fall of 1965 I was hired by the then Bendix Corporation as an industrial mathematician. My official title, however, was that of a scientific programmer. A few years later Vern Glover was hired as a commercial programmer. We had both graduated from Historically Black Colleges. Glover was a mathematics major from Arkansas AM & N, now renamed the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff. I had earned two degrees, a bachelor’s and a master’s, in mathematics from Texas Southern University. (In those

years, very few colleges even offered courses in any computer related areas, let alone degrees. Corporations typically converted employees who had degrees in subjects requiring math usage into scientific programmers, and those who had degrees in business related areas into commercial programmers.)

Glover and I had attended college in the heat of the Civil Rights Movement and often discussed how we could give back to the community. I can recall Glover expressly stating to me: “Dick, we have to do something with our kids. We have to start by working with them!” A few years later I would call upon Glover, reminding him of that comment.

While I was in college, I became interested in getting a PhD and teaching in one of our Historically Black Colleges & Universities (HBCU). However, illness caused me to alter my plans and I ended up back in my hometown of Kansas City, Missouri. Now that I was living comfortably back home, I began developing an interest in working with the Kansas City, Missouri School District (KCMSD) to help them improve the mathematics education of their students. After all, many of them were members of families that I had grown up with, including my own.

The district had come up with what I thought was a novel way of organizing its elementary school math and science approaches. It reasoned that the elementary school teachers teach to their strengths. So why not identify the teachers in each of its elementary schools who considered math and science their strengths. And then designate them as the Math/Science coordinators for their respective schools, thereby making it possible for them to assist their fellow teachers who were not as strong in those areas as they were.

My former high school basketball coach, the late Perry Kirkpatrick, was then head of secondary education for the district. I asked him if it was possible for me to make a presentation to the Math/Science coordinators. He helped make the arrangement for that to happen. After my presentation, they voted unanimously for me to come back once a month and work with them. They would try out my suggestions during the month and then we would come together and discuss how they went. I told them that my participation would not cost the district anything because my job would allow me to participate on a monthly basis as a contribution to education in the city.

But before it could even get started, a discrimination lawsuit was filed against the KCMSD that caused it to abandon the project so that it could concentrate all of its energies into that lawsuit. All of that planning was scrapped and thrown down the drain. Needless to say how frustrated I was at that lost opportunity. It was also illustrative of what happens when you have little or no control over the responses to influencing events and outside forces. Now I had no choice but to focus my energies in another direction.

During that same time an energetic young man named Emmanuel Cleaver had been hired by Bendix also. He had just graduated from Prairie View A&M University in sociology and worked in the planning area. He, Glover and I (among other HBCU graduates) had developed friendships and would often get together and compare collegiate experiences.

In 1968 a riot broke out in KC’s African American community after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. And the directors of the YMCA of Greater Kansas City decided they wanted to do something to address the needs of KC’s urban core by establishing an Urban Services Branch. They had approached Cleaver to be its

executive director. Cleaver approached me to join their board of directors so that I could help him develop and implement plans and projects to address those needs. While there, Cleaver arranged for Dr. Ralph Abernathy to come to KC and speak at a YMCA program. Rev. Abernathy was so impressed with Cleaver that he encouraged him to set up a Kansas City chapter of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). He talked it over with me and I too thought it would be a good idea.

By then I was beginning to feel that we could do more for our community within a community based organization that we had more influence over. We could do things the way we felt best, without having to always seek out approval from others whose understanding of our community was not as in-depth as ours. (This is a theme that would play out later within the DLC.)

After the Kansas City chapter of SCLC was established, Cleaver recruited the late Rev. John Preciphs to join. Rev. Preciphs was, like Rev. Abernathy, impressed with Cleaver and in turn recruited him to join the ministry. In 1973 I approached the SCLC board about establishing a mathematics tutorial program to be conducted in the now *Reverend* Cleaver's church, St. James Gregory United Methodists. (Roy Brown, a recent Southern University electrical engineering graduate, had been hired into the department at Bendix in which I worked. He readily joined with me in our tutoring sessions. And Robert McKinnie, a Tennessee State University electrical engineering graduate was hired by Bendix a year later and has been with us every since.) After holding a few classes and realizing the potential of what was happening, I contacted Glover, who was then employed by the US Dept. of Agriculture (DOA), about joining with our efforts, reminding him of the previous comments he had made about working with our youth. We were conducting our tutorial sessions on Saturday mornings. Glover showed up the Saturday morning subsequent to our conversation and has been working with our kids ever since.

The reading program had begun even before the math program had started up. Two community activists named Bill Grace, who also worked at Central High School in Kansas City, and Leon Clanton had established a reading tutorial program that operated out of the Paseo United Methodist Church, where Rev. Preciph pastored. Grace had been using W.E.B. DuBois's book, *The Souls of Black Folks* while working with his charges. He was so impressed by that work that he named their endeavor, the W.E.B. DuBois Reading Center. At Rev. Preciph's urging, we eventually joined our two efforts, which we renamed the W.E.B. DuBois Learning Center so that we would not have to undergo any other name changes due to other areas we may incorporate.

There were two different approaches to the way each of the programs was run. The reading program operated with the traditional methods (especially the ones that followed the culture that grew out of the "Great Society") by soliciting grants and hiring persons to work in it. We in the mathematics program relied on volunteers that we knew and worked with in the corporations. The churches let us use their classrooms in which they taught Sunday school to teach math on Saturdays and reading during weekdays. Since the math section relied on area professionals who were reasonably well paid, we could also rely on them to volunteer. Thereby we could operate, based upon what we ourselves could contribute. After a while the reading program adopted this method of operating also. This, in turn, would lead to a "culture" within the Learning Center that would later on lead to the establishment of the Telehub Network.

In the reading of this memoir you will notice that I freely draw parallels, lessons, and even insights from music that emanates from our culture. Witness the chapter titles, and even the title of this prelude. Much of our music has traditionally been renowned for its dual meanings containing concealed messages. (For example: Harriet Tubman was regularly referred to as “the old ship of Zion,” and those enslaved persons who were planning to escape knew full well what “get on board” meant.) Herein I admittedly take the liberty of invoking an author’s privilege of extracting similar allegories.



Andrea Martin is one of hip-hop’s most notable lyricists. She may not be that well known by the general public, but you can rest assured that she is well known and respected among the conscientious artists throughout the hip-hop community. She has only one CD that I know of: “The Best of Me.” On it she has a song entitled “Steppin’.” It includes the following lines:

*How long is too long to wait
for the man of my dreams to come and take me away?
Promises are made to be broken. ...
I guess this is a lesson that is messing with my mind.*

*I got to be leaving. 'Cause for your love I'm blind.
I'll be steppin' 'cause I won't be hurt this time.*

Clearly she is writing about a lost love. But for me, I chose to take this as a metaphor for a condition of life that we have long longed for, like “freedom, justice and equality,” or even “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” For me “the man of our dreams” is a metaphor for a messianic leader. You know, like someone that can lead us to the Promised Land. But looking back over our sojourn in this land, we should have learned this “lesson that has been messing with our minds.”

She goes on to express what she plans to do about her unrequited love. And continuing with the metaphor: It takes extraordinary insight to realize that you have been or are blinded by a concept, or something you believe in, that you hold dear. And it takes even more extraordinary inner strength to conjure up the fortitude to leave, or alter your course of action, in order to achieve your desired vision.

And furthermore, it is folly to expect a “man of our dreams to come and take us away,” let alone wait for it. If we want to venture into the Promised Land we will have to show some initiative ourselves. If we don’t want to continue to be hurt, we will have to step (move) out on our own (or as Janet Jackson intimated, we need to take “control”).



In a sense, this is the sentiment and mindset that led us to establish the W.E.B. DuBois Learning Center back in 1973. We felt that we had the talent and expertise to supplement the education of our youth. And we wanted to be able to do it by using some culturally related approaches as we saw fit. I discussed, in more detail, how this was done from the DLC’s beginning through its first fifteen years in the book, *Future In Our*

Hands. However, in this offering I will focus on how our “Telecommunications Hub” (Telehub) Network was conceived and cultivated—in order to address the evolving concerns arising from the Information Age—and how it bore fruit.