

## Chapter Two: Giant Steps

**L**ittle did most folks know just how much the Information Technology explosion would accelerate in the mid 90's. However, those of us who worked with this technology had some insight into its promises as well as the shape of things to come.

Those of us at the Learning Center first simply wanted to be able to host web pages and to try to enable our community to take advantage of the various uses of the Internet. We knew we couldn't compete with the "big boys" when it came to being an Internet Service Provider. So we simply sought to teach classes in computer/Internet technology, including web page designing & maintaining, and to host web pages of community business, churches, and organizations, etc. However, even these modest ambitions would lead to promising opportunities to take advantage of that could lead to growth potential for the Learning Center.

For example, one of the web pages we hosted for a while was for "Willa's Books." Lisa Cole, was Willa Robinson's niece and was maintaining her web site. Lisa was a computer science and business teacher at Hickman Mills High School. One evening, in one of our sessions on designing web pages, I was showing her how use the software that would enable her to upload web pages onto our server from her home. Bill Grace walked in all excited, telling me about the "brother" who worked at General Electric that had asked him, "What could you do with ten thousand dollars?" Grace went on to say that his name was Phil Cole and that he was a manager in human resources at GE. I looked at him smilingly and said, "This is his wife right here."

When Phil came to one of our staff meetings he was sitting near me and remarked that he was amazed to see this many highly skilled African Americans working together, volunteering their time and talent, to benefit our community. (We have heard similar comments from several others!) He said that he wanted to get more involved with us and see what he could do to help us out. Phil worked with us to secure a \$20,000 grant from the General Electric Foundation to enable us to rehabilitate one of the wings of the Learning Center and turn it into a better-equipped computer lab.

In our old computer lab, that we now call "lab one," we had our web-hosting server in an old converted closet. We had realized earlier the need to upgrade our server space and wanted to convert a larger room for that purpose. After receiving the grant from General Electric, we were able to refurbish and upgrade an entire wing, which we dubbed "lab two."

Another web page we hosted for a while was for The Black Archives of Mid-America. We hosted their page until the Kansas City Library Association awarded them a grant to develop and host a site. The person assigned to develop it was Elonda Clay. She contacted us so that we could share with her what we had done. She liked what we were doing at the DLC and when the project was finished she volunteered to work with us. She developed a page for us to give information to students interested in going to college ([www.duboislrc.org/College/guide.html](http://www.duboislrc.org/College/guide.html)).

Meanwhile, Earl Baker had talked with Robert Cooper (whom he had known as a child) about taking our web page designing class. Cooper is the son of the late "Big John" Cooper, who ran a local pool hall. As a consequence Robert grew up to be

exceptionally streetwise. (Incidentally, his father gave him strict orders to never bet against Earl in a pool game. He told him that Earl Baker was one of the best pool shooters in town and that there were very few people who could beat him.) He was also a computer science major while attending Central Missouri State College. After being called to the army, he was sent on a tour in Viet Nam. Cooper was able to avoid combat duties, he says, “because of the skills he acquired while in college.” And he was assigned office duties because of the shortage of personnel with the skills for that kind of work.

When Elonda Clay acquired further employment that put demands on her time that prevented her from continuing with her work with us, Robert Cooper stepped in to take over her responsibilities. All in all, things were continuing to look up for us. But little did we know how much things were really going to change. We entered into what we dubbed our “first phase” with a passion. The plan, mentioned earlier, was to ask each church to designate some of its youth for us to train how to run cables and prepare their church for receiving a wireless signal from the Learning Center that would enable them to access software on our servers as well as have access to the Internet.

The first church we wired up was the Swope Parkway Church of Christ, which was located across the street from us. Rev. Gerald McGill, and his wife Gloria, would become some of the most ardent supporters of our “Telehub Network.” Recall that George Fletcher, a professional electrician with an expertise in running cables, trained the students, along with some interested adults during the evenings after school. And that he was ably assisted by the Powell brothers, Jerry and Melvin, who also had expertise in this field. After two weeks of training the crew would go to work prepping the church.

After finishing the Church of Christ, the process was started again with St. Louis Catholic Church, up the street from the DLC. Next we did Covenant Presbyterian Church, across the street from St. Louis Catholic Church, and its cabin next door to it, used by its Boy Scout troop. Then we followed up with the Swope Park United Christian Church, a block up the street from St. Louis, and finally the Bridge Home for Boys, located across the street from the United Christian Church. That gave us five sites in all. However, the churches were the primary sites. But because we had prepared a cluster of sites, we were able to cut some expenses by buying in bulk. And also because we were saving some money by using students, we were able to stretch our resources to wire up more sites than we had originally planned. That is how we were able to include the scout cabin and the boy’s home in our initial phase.

In the midst of wiring Covenant Presbyterian Church, Harrison met George Walker, a senior manager of engineering maintenance for SBC. Upon finding out about his technological background, Harrison encouraged him to become involved with us, especially in the youth training aspect. It was a good thing too, because George Fletcher was becoming too stretched out in training the students and then taking them on the site to do the wiring. So the two Georges, put their heads together and came up with the strategy for George **Walker** to do the training while George **Fletcher** and the Powell Brothers would take the students that had been trained and do the wiring.

When the work was all finished we had a ceremony, rewarding the students who participated in the wiring project. Walter May, Harrison’s father, worked for Gateway Computers at the time. He had talked to the owner about what was taking place with the

kids wiring up their churches. Gateway made a donation of \$5,000 to the project to reward the students. We had kept track of the hours they had put in and divided them into the \$5000 to give the students a surprise stipend.

We had a vision that this endeavor of wiring facilities to access our servers via the Internet could lead to a for-profit operation. The vision was to continue to wire up churches and non-profit organizations through the grants we received, but we would wire up business for a fee. The students, who acquired this experience and really did a good job, would be the ones we would offer to hire for the business wiring jobs. This would enable us to offer some of our youth part time employment.

With that in mind, and since George Fletcher and the Powell brothers would be the ones in charge of this aspect of the operation, we decided that we should pay them for their services. However, they contributed much more to the project than what we were able to compensate them for.

**But that is not all** of the behind-the-scenes activities and coordination that was being done. Little-by-little a team was coming together, forming a relationship that would make the Telehub project a wonder to behold.

Recall also that Tracy Chatman, who had come to the Center to see about acquiring information to help her church set up after school programs, had joined the Telehub section in the capacity of helping coordinate the purchasing of equipment needed for the wiring and setting up business plans for conducting the operation. She had become the Telehub's overall girl Friday.

In addition to Tracy's participation there was that of Joyce Gant. Joyce had brought her son to be tutored in mathematics at the Center. During the orientation she learned of the Telehub Network project. She told us about her background in computer science, and that she worked at Aventis Pharmaceuticals. She became involved in organizing the coordinators of the Telehub satellites. Her role was to help them understand how to use the infrastructure that we had put in place and how to use it to operate the various activities they had going on, especially the ones involving education.

The Black Data Professionals Association (BDPA) is an organization consisting of African Americans who work in the various Information Technology fields. We had developed a relationship with them for several years. They would use our facility to train area youth in Information Technology for their annual contest hosted at their convention. After we had established our Telehub Network, they invited us to make a presentation to their group. Ron Craddolph, Harrison May, and I were again called to perform the task. Many of their members expressed an interest in working with us. However, there was one young man in particular, Aaron Brooks, who quietly sat there during the entire presentation. After it was over he expressed to Harrison that he wanted to get to know more about the inner workings of our Telehub Network. Aaron became a protégé of Harrison, as well as his right-hand man, when it came to maintaining the operation of the infrastructure of the network—working with the servers in particular. At that time Aaron had not finished college, but all of us encouraged him to complete his education, which he eventually did.

Also, James Banks of BDPA worked with us to develop a relationship with the Microsoft Educational Foundation. As a result of his support, in addition to the contacts

that Harrison May had with them, Microsoft donated to us the software to enable us to offer their Office Suite to the users in all of our satellites.

And then there was Carmen Witherspoon. She is married to Ralph Brown, the owner of Sportsmen's House of Coiffures (where Chris Thompson's father, "Weasel" had worked). Ralph and I were in high school together. He has been an avid supporter of the Learning Center from our early beginnings. Carmen also worked with Joyce at Aventis. Carmen took on the responsibility of organizing our storage facility for all of our technology hardware. She would make sure that the equipment and supplies were together and ready for the wiring at the sites.

Shirley Elliot had joined the project and took over the responsibility of office administration. She did the record keeping of the student's activities, the purchasing invoices and documents of our correspondence with business, corporations and foundations, etc. Her brother, Tim Elliot of American Foods, and Robert Mayfield of General Electric joined the computer staff and taught courses in the Microsoft office suite to both students and adults.

It was truly amazing to me to observe how all of this volunteer talent was coming together to make this project work!

**By this time Harrison May** had changed jobs several times. He had left Allied Signal (now Honeywell) for the House of Lloyd, then to Midwest Health Association and finally to Hallmark Cards. His position at Hallmark was in network security. Harrison was able to attract some of his fellow Hallmark associates to join in his efforts in the Learning Center's Telehub project. They were John "Jay" Williams, who was in network security with Harrison, Moné Jones and Calvin Robinson, both computer science majors who worked in web-page design. All three are proud graduates of North Carolina A&T University.

Even before we began these activities, Harrison would quietly say that monies were going to flow into the Center as a result of the telecommunications operational infrastructure that we were setting up. After the Sprint grant we began to apply for others.

First we had our eyes on a U.S Department of Commerce matching grant for \$900,000. We went to great pains trying to submit a proposal for it. We went to conferences and even consulted people we knew to help us write up a convincing case for us. At the same time we got wind of a grant from the U.S. Department of Education for \$300,000. So we decided that we might as well apply for that one too. As things turned out, the Dept of Commerce turned us down, but we did receive the grant from the Dept. of Education.

Now things were really going to change and change quickly. I would often say that it takes about three to five years before a new volunteer would become comfortable enough at the Learning Center to become self assertive. I remember stating in a staff meeting that we were getting ready to go through some trying times. We had no one to look to for guidance because we were plodding new territory. That there would be times when we were flatly going to get on each other's nerves. Normally we would have time to get to know each other and develop the techniques "as we go." This time, with the steady influx of new volunteers the Telehub project was attracting, we would not have

that luxury. But we had no choice. We didn't have time to wait, and we would simply have to learn as we proceeded along. In order to make this project work we had to go with who and what we had. As the saying goes, "Go with what you got." And we all committed to do what we had to do, indeed what we all felt that we must do. We then embarked into what we referred to as our "second phase."

In 1993 Brian Welch married Petrice Whitiker, who tutored subtraction in our mathematics program. When she introduced him to us, and he saw the community work we were doing, he decided to join in with us. He was an accountant for the Hallmark Corp. before he set up own CPA firm, Welch & Associates. In addition to tutoring algebra and pre-algebra, he stepped up and helped us with our accounting and bookkeeping.

Upon learning of us receiving the DOE grant, Brian said that now we have to "move our accounting procedures up to a whole new level." It was time, he stated, "for me to move inside to work closer with executive and administrative aspect of the DLC." This would enable him to better oversee our financial procedures. So he stepped down from our board and we hired his firm to do our accounting. This allowed him to better oversee our financial inner workings.

**The day of the presentation of the DOE grant** was a joyous occasion. A representative from DOE was there along with the U.S Congress Representative, Karyn McCarthy. Missouri State Representatives Sharon Sanders Brooks and Craig Bland, Kansas City Councilman Terry Riley, and Kansas City Missouri School Board member Marilyn Simmons were present as well. And also present was the Rev. Wallace S. Hartsfield. Rev. Hartsfield is the pastor of Metropolitan Missionary Baptist Church. Metropolitan is one of the largest churches in our community. And Rev. Hartsfield is one of the most highly respected ministers in the entire Greater Kansas City Area. He has always been one of our most enthusiastic supporters. When he became aware of the Telecommunications Network that we were planning to develop throughout the city, he expressed the desire to have his church participate in it with us. And they even offered to help defray some of the cost.

Rev. Hartsfield had noticed the success of our first phase and saw how both his church and the Learning Center could mutually benefit each other.

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*Giant Steps is the title tune of one of John Coltrane's most noted, celebrated and groundbreaking albums. He says the name comes from the fact that "the bass line is kind of a loping one. It goes from minor thirds to fourths, kind of a lop-sided pattern in contrast to moving strictly in fourths or in half-steps."*

*Over the years the members of the DLC have learned to think big. And the Telehub project was proving to be no exception. There was definitely no "half-stepping" here.*

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Metropolitan Missionary Baptist Church is approximately three miles from the Learning Center. The twenty-foot antenna that was perched atop the Learning Center was not going to be able to reach it. For the wireless concept to work there had to be

line-of-site connection. So Harrison knew that we would have to resort to another strategy to reach them. He decided that we needed a large tower on which we could place a dish to be able to see a receiver at Metropolitan MBC. We ended up with a 180-foot tower, dubbed “the Beacon of Hope” by Jerry McEvoy of the Swope Corridor Renaissance.

In order to have the tower erected, we had to go through the proper channels with City Hall. It took a whole lot of patience and wrangling working with the city bureaucrats. I continued to be amazed by the fortitude that Bill Grace exhibited in orchestrating this endeavor. The elected officials, especially the members of Freedom, Inc., readily threw in their support behind our project. But it was Bill Grace who coordinated the activity with the architects and the surveying; gathered petition signatures from neighborhood residents, churches and business, etc. to support us; and stayed on the case meeting with the bureaucracy and the other necessary parties until the job was completed.

We were pleasantly surprised when we became aware of a fortunate opportunity that Metropolitan MBC presented us. While analyzing the work to be done at there, it was discovered that the location on the roof where we wanted to place an antennae to receive the signal from the DLC that we could see the tops of other churches and centers close by that also wanted to be participate in the project. That is, from Metropolitan MBC we could relay a signal to several other potential sites. Things were really looking up for us and falling into place.

Rev. Hartsfield readily admits that he is not technologically literate. However, one day while I was at a meeting at his church, he saw me and came up to me in an excited state. He said to me, “Man, we been crowing around here.” Some of their elder members had inquired about what their kids were doing. When it was explained to them, they became excited. Rev. Hartsfield even related that the kids did not want to go home in the evenings when their parents came to pick them up. They were just that into the work that they were doing.

When we finished with Metropolitan Missionary Baptist Church (MMBC) we repeated the same process with Metropolitan African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, located a few blocks northeast from MMBC. Also Metropolitan AME Zion is the church that Phillip and Lisa Cole attended. We also brought Salem Baptist Church, located several blocks in the other direction from MMBC and Palestine Senior Citizens Center, which is also just a few blocks southeast from MMBC. Metropolitan Missionary Baptist Church became the relay point to these sites in what we refer to as the Linwood Cluster. That name was derived from the fact that MMBC is located on Linwood Blvd. in Kansas City, Missouri.

When we finished wiring up the “Linwood Cluster,” we held a celebration at the Palestine Senior Citizen’s Center. Joyce Gant, Carmen Witherspoon, along with Bettye Watt and Vershell Smith who had also joined the Telehub’s administration team planned the activity. It featured the music of Ground Level, with Elton Gumbel—vocals and piano, Keith Leathers—bass, and Lee Barnes—drums. This is a group of conscious artists who have supported the DLC since its early years. Rev. McGill of Swope Park Church of Christ was the featured speaker. He complimented the dedication of the volunteers whose work made it all happen and pointed to all of the possibilities it held our for the future, and gave notice to the community spirit that was developing wherein

we were all working together for our common good. In attendance also was Lewis Parker from GE, who stated that they would continue to work with and support our efforts; and (his name?), a representative from Microsoft, expressed the significance of what we had established and that they would continue to support us with donations of software.

All in all, a community spirit was developing that inspired us all. At one of the meetings that Joyce Gant was conducting, a site coordinator exclaimed that she just didn't know that much about computers and she didn't know if she was going to be able to take full advantage of the infrastructure the way that the others seemed to be able to do. At that point Chris Huff, the site coordinator for the Upper Room, said to her, "Don't worry about that sister, we got your back."

Working with these churches and their various activities that took place during the day raised the level of service to the community that the Learning Center needed to provide. We now need to have daytime support staff. We approached the Kauffman Foundation here in Kansas City, and held discussions with them regarding our situation. They worked with us to put together a proposal for the funds to hire the necessary tech support staff.

Elton Gumbel, Jr., was a member of our reading staff who also happened to be KC's most culturally conscious lyricist. He also had some multimedia knowledge and experience, and therefore was an ideal candidate to be our systems administrator. Elton had taken a severance package from his position as a Human Resource Administrator for the Olin Corporation after 20 years at the Lake City Army Ammunition Plant and was therefore available for the job. But above all, he was willing and viewed this as an opportunity to give back to the community even more so than he was already doing.

Harrison, who handled most of the system administration duties, along with his able bodied cohorts, Aaron Brown and Jay Williams, was glad to have someone like Elton to work with during the day. Elton turned out to be more than just a willing worker who was able to catch on quickly. His relationship with Grace and his knowledge of the inner workings of the DLC, allowed him to be a tremendous asset as to coordinating activity between the newly established Telehub section and the traditional DLC sections. In addition to that, he was able to assist Grace in the various writings of correspondence and proposals. All in all, it turned out to be an excellent arrangement.

**As usual there are some unforeseen circumstances** that need to be addressed. One such incident was with the Palestine Senior Citizen's Center. After all of the work was completed installing the network and setting up their computer lab, we noticed that the seniors were just sitting there looking at the computers. We observed that they had little knowledge as to how to use them.

Solution: Elton set up some training classes for the seniors. His father had been an optometrist in Kansas City for many years. And when he introduced himself at the beginning of the classes as Elton Gumbel, Jr., several of the seniors started tugging at their glasses. Smiles ensued as Elton was warmly received.

Another occurrence was when we notice that the connection between the Center and MMBC, while fine during the weekends, but would go down during weekdays. We

finally realized that there must have been some signals from a business or other facility that was knocking ours out.

Solution: We put a Virtual Private Network (VPN) box in MMBC that allowed them to connect with us through the Internet. That cleared things up and allowed us to relay signals from them to the other sites in the Linwood Cluster.

After the success of Phase Two, the DLC staff thought it would be good to recognize the Telehub Network crew for their achievements. We held the ceremony at Swope Parkway Church of Christ (SPCC), across the street from the Center. One of the main coordinators for the event was Terri Moore. She had brought her son to the Center, and decided that she would like to get involved with us. Terri worked in management for the American Century Insurance Company, and became an ideal addition to our administration staff that was both needed and welcomed.

One day while coming from a meeting at SPCC, I had an opportunity to discuss with her in more detail about what all was happening with the Telehub project. I tried to explain to her how this project could benefit our community and what some of the various possibilities were that the Telehub project enabled us to do. That, for example, when the school kids in the fourth grade and above are asked to do homework, nowadays it may be expected to be word processed. And many of the kids in the urban core don't have access to computers. But, it is said, "They can use computers in the libraries." However, there are only two here in KC's urban core. But there are churches "on every other corner." If we can strategically locate enough satellites connected to our network, many of the students could have access to the technology within walking distance.

Besides, there are an esoteric few persons in our community who are knowledgeable of this technology and its uses in our community to the extent to make this happen. But by establishing this network we can maximize their effectiveness because most of the work can be done at the Center. There the maintenance and upgrades, both of hardware and software, can take place at the DLC, freeing up the various satellites of that responsibility.

I can recall her saying that she had "no idea" of all that. From that point on she became more involved in working with the network and making more and better use of it.

It turned out that at the ceremony I happened to be sitting at the table with our guest speaker, who was Phil Curls, the former state senator. Likewise, he too had little knowledge about the various benefits of the Telehub Network to our community. Naturally I did not pass up on the opportunity to enlighten him.

He approached us about wiring up his office located in the Gates & Sons office building. (Gates & Sons have several bar-b-q restaurants throughout Greater Kansas City.) Ron Craddolph was an old friend of Phil's. The Craddolph, the Curls, and the Gates families all knew each other. So that was a natural fit. During the process, Phil became even more knowledgeable of the benefits of the project and asked if we could make a presentation to the Missouri Black Legislatures conference to be held in Branson, Missouri. Phil arranged for Ron's and Harrison's jobs and SBC and Hallmark Cards, respectively, to let them off to do it. However, he began to have second thoughts as to who should make the presentation. He called me one evening asking me if I could come to the conference and be involved because he felt that Ron and Harrison were so technical that they may speak over the participants' heads. So I agreed to go.

I was our primary presenter at the conference. But before I was halfway through it, some of the participants interrupted me and started asking questions as to how their parts of the state could get involved. Ron and Harrison both had to step up and answer many of their questions. It was an enlightening experience and hopefully the financing can be obtained to act on their requests.

All of this caused us to realize that we needed to do some mission planning. Enter Leah Russell. Leah is a manager for the U.S Department of Transportation, and has overseen multi-million dollar projects. She is also a member of the Kansas City Chapter of the National Black United Front (KCBUF). As such she was well aware of the DLC and its works. Mickey Dean, also of KCBUF, teaches math for older students needing special help. He was in desperate need of more help due to the increasing number of such students. So he approached Leah to him help out. Which she so willing did.

After Keith Rainey, our Chief Financial Officer, had to resign due to job related increase on his time, Leah was asked to join our board and become our new CFO. After joining the board, she began to realize that we needed to put together a mission statement and a paper stating our goals and objectives, especially with regard to the Telehub Network project.

She asked some acquaintances of hers, Johnnie Flemming and Romel Cooks, to facilitate the sessions. (I had originally met Johnnie and her husband Johnny at the Historical Black Colleges and Universities' local organization when it was getting started. Johnnie had gone to University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff and Johnny had gone to Jackson State University.)

We met several times thrashing things out. We discussed how we wanted to expand the Telehub to other parts of the city, and eventually to other parts of the country. We discussed how we could even take a page from what some of the universities were doing. We could become incubators for businesses. It was a good brainstorming session considering where we had come from, where we were at the time, and how we could evolve to even greater heights given what we had going for us.

But when we started to try and come up with a mission statement, things started to stall. I can recall saying, "Just let me talk for a while." I remember saying something like, "I'm thinking Coltrane. ... I mean like—Giant Steps."

That phrase, that concept caught on. And we kept working with it until we finally came up with the mission statement: "Creating Giant Steps Together."