Chapter Three: Stepping Into Tomorrow

Looking back, it is interesting to note the giant steps that can be accomplished when you have people who play to their strengths. Many times we don't even take advantage as we should of the talents we have available to us by using them as we should. And I submit that these are the things we must do if we are to take giant steps into the future.

Let us take a moment to look at one of the lessons that we can learn from the African liberation movements. One of the first things they did whenever they liberated some territory was to evaluate its natural resources. That was because those were the things that were available to them that could be used to build their economy upon.

Likewise we should evaluate the assets we have in our own communities. One of the things that we should do is take a look at the advantages that have accrued to us as a result of our struggles in the sixties. One of the results that occurred was that many of us were able to gain employment into the large corporations as professionals. That means we were able to:

1. Acquire a variety of sets of knowledge as a consequence.
2. Earn salaries that enabled us to live comfortably above subsistence levels.
3. Have enough spare time after a day's work to be able to give some back.
4. Be able to form relationships and networks with other knowledgeable people.

The question becomes, "How can we use these assets to benefit our communities?" Let us analyze them with regard to the development of our Telecommunications Network.

Before I proceed I would like to make this parenthetical remark:

> I was on a panel discussion concerning education at a convention for the National Black United Front in San Francisco in 2001. I pointed out that during the sixties and seventies that "our movement" involved the activists, artists, business people, educators, politicians, religious persons, scholars, street folks, etc. It had everybody involved except the technical folks. And those of us with technical backgrounds who were involved were asked to stuff envelopes. Now I exaggerated to make my point. That being that our technical backgrounds were not taken advantage of the way they could and should have been. It is true that we had skills and talents that could be put to use in other areas. But that is like asking Satchel Paige to play third base just because he had a good strong arm and could throw straight.

Having people play to their strengths is one of the strategies that the Learning Center put into practice. One of the key things we did was to ask those who use mathematics in their professions (accountants, engineers, programmers, etc.) to tutor our youth in mathematics. Those who had backgrounds in the natural sciences (chemists, chemical engineers, medical professionals, physicists, etc.) were asked to tutor science. Those who had backgrounds in the humanities were asked to tutor reading. Those with backgrounds in Information Technology were asked to tutor computer related subjects. And in the area of Information Technology, it really paid off.

They had the freedom to use their best judgment as to how to proceed and to come up with innovative strategies. It was this freedom of implementing the fruits of their collective imagination that created the environment that enabled our staffers with

backgrounds in Information Technology to come up with and implement the Telecommunications Hub ("Telehub") Network concept.

With respect to the first point: It is commonly said that when you graduate from college with a degree in Information Technology (IT) that you will still be four years behind. The cutting edge knowledge in IT is within the large corporations and big government institutions, etc. So by working there, you can gain access to that cutting edge knowledge. If institutions are set up in our communities where our people can bring their knowledge back for our collective uplift, it can be beneficial to us all.

Many African Americans are frustrated with the low regard many of their employers have for their skills, talents and ideas. In our community-based institutions they can be given opportunities to spread their wings and fly. It is worthy to note that this is a dynamic that is inherent in many of our churches.

The advance of most new concepts and breakthrough results come from the efforts of who can be called an esoteric few; often led by one or two persons. With regard to the Telehub, that person is Harrison May. It was primarily his idea that we all rallied around. Initially, he and Gary Gorman worked together to get the Internet Protocol (IP) up and running. Shortly thereafter Ron Craddolph came along. Then Harrison recruited one of his IT associates from Allied Signal, Fred Gresham (whom he helped mentor), to help out. Then we were awarded the grant from Sprint, championed by Chris Thompson, which led to the establishment of the Telehub. And after our presentation to the BDPA, Aaron Brooks joined us. Later, when Harrison hired on at Hallmark, he was able to recruit one of his fellow associates in networking, John "Jay" Williams, to join the project. Also he recruited a Hallmark graphic artist, Calvin Robinson to join up. Calvin set up classes in webpage design, computer graphics and photo-shop. (This is also an example of where Number Four comes into play.)

On the second and third points: The scholars of the liberation struggles point out that, "In the early stages, you have to live off the land." This is because if you want true liberation you have to be able to initially sustain it yourself. Help will come when you demonstrate your resolve. In the later stages, however, you will have to engage the larger world community. For us "to live off the land" meant being able to sustain ourselves on what our communities can support.

It is worthy to note that whenever some territory was liberated, one of the first things that was done was to establish schools and health clinics. Our objective here was to deal with supplementing the education of our youth. It was a result of evaluating the "natural resources" available to us that led us to recognize that our churches had some space that could be used for working with our youth. And it was that evaluation that also resulted in us realizing that we had a population of people (e.g. skilled professionals) who had both knowledge and talent to share while also being financially well off enough not to require a salary. And they had spare time available to them that could be utilized for this purposes. The task at hand was to pull it all together.

The reading program initially started out using volunteers. However, when Rev. Preciphs was able to secure a grant from the United Methodist for Church Renewal, it

started paying its tutors. On the other hand, the math program continued with volunteer tutors even after having moved its operations to Rev. Preciphs' church. It has often been pointed out that the reason we were able to obtain and continue with "volunteer" math tutors was because we were enlisting the support of co-workers and friends, especially in our early years. Consequently, the math program was constantly growing while the reading program was somewhat stagnant.

I can recall a conversation that I had with Rev. Preciphs one evening, where he asked: "Why is it that the math program is growing and the reading program is not?" I answered: "It's because you are paying the teachers." I went on to explain more, something like this: "You can only afford to pay two teachers. And you can't get anybody to volunteer to work for free when someone else is getting paid. So you can't get any more teachers than you can afford to pay. Because the math program relies on volunteers, when the number of our students grow to the point that we need more teachers, we just go out and beat the bushes to recruit some more. Besides, we can't afford to pay the people we recruit what they are really worth anyway. And besides that, they are not doing it for the money. They are doing it because they want to give something back"

Eventually the reading section adopted this same strategy of using volunteers. After which it too began to grow. Also this approach enabled us to operate with little funds. The churches gave us space to tutor, and we voluntarily gave of our time. We now often jokingly talk about how we used to operate in our early days on a hundred dollar a year budget! However, those days have long since passed. But that set the tone for what we often refer to as the "culture of the Learning Center." Since we were all volunteering, nobody could *tell* anybody else what to do, or approach them like some supervisor would often do. We had to rely on a culture of persuasion. If your idea was the best or most convincing then, and only then, would it be the one that would win out. Also, your work and effort for the "cause" entitled you to have your voice heard. It was a true meritocracy where each of us rose to the levels that our respective efforts, talents and interests carried us.

As alluded to in the prelude, "The best way to organize people is around a project." Our project was to supplement the education of our youth. It was an objective profound enough for us to rally around, as well as to cause us to rise above our petty (and sometimes not so petty) differences.

It is also worthwhile to note that the mathematics program was the section of the Learning Center from which the computer section and the Telehub eventually were to spin off and evolve. (Recall that Danita Brewer, who was the original head of the computer section, was a geometry tutor. Also Keith Rainey would help out in the math section at times when we were short handed.)

The fourth point: Scientific advancement occurs these days in an environment known as "big science," where groups of scientists work together in teams. Gone are the days of Newton and Einstein where individuals work alone in their labs or studies. Although some ideas and concepts still may have their beginnings that way, to implement them

nowadays requires "big science." Besides, only the large corporations and big government can come up with the necessary resources required to finance these large scale operations.

The large institutions continuously send their associates to classes to update their skills and they encourage them to work together. Consequently, ideas, concepts and knowledge are shared, sometimes profusely. That kind of environment enables the people working within them to remain constantly abreast of the latest developments in their fields as well as their possible usages. By having people like this working within the Learning Center, the information that they possessed could be made readily available and could very likely lead to future ventures. There is a lot of cross-fertilization that takes place. All of this helps the Center to remain abreast of the latest advances, especially with respect to technology. It is crucial that there are persons like this who are involved with community programs who are willing to learn, stay abreast of things and to share their knowledge with the community and its institutions.

That, roughly speaking, was how the W.E.B. DuBois Learning Center was established. However, with the advent of our Telecommunications Hub, we began venturing into new horizons.

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Stepping into tomorrow—got both feet on the ground.
Stepping into tomorrow—my destiny is found.

This declarative chorus line gets repeated throughout the title tune of Donald Byrd's album "Stepping Into Tomorrow." It reflects the disposition that imbues the Learning Center and contributes to its culture. The IT staffers are well grounded in their understanding of the benefits that the Telehub Network can provide for our community. They are also well aware of its enabling potential…as we proceed—stepping into tomorrow.

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IT persons well grounded in their fields are the forces behind the Learning Center's Telehub Network project. They approach the project as if it was their calling. This is manifested by their dedication and work to make it successful. They clearly enjoy being able to use their knowledge, skills and talents to make this kind of contribution to our community. And in addition to this, it is rewarding for them to know just how much their efforts are really appreciated for doing so. Moreover, they know that they are taking part in an endeavor that they envision will be a tremendous asset for the benefit and uplift to their community. The growing camaraderie that continues to develop between the DLC volunteers is manifestly evident within the Telehub section. Sometimes it seems as though they operate as if they are in a state of nirvana. Perhaps their inner feelings can be captured in the words of the Ohio Players: "Heaven must be like this." However, let me hasten to add though, that they do occasionally experience times that "try men's souls."

One of our major concerns that we all rallied around in order to make a redress was the problem of lack of access to Information Technology by children in the urban core. Today there are several institutions and organizations that have established computer centers. Often times the computers they are using have been donated by some

corporation. This means they are necessarily not using the latest versions. In addition to that, after a little time, the kids will invariably break them. Under our strategy, our satellites will be using the "thin client" technology. This makes use of an "interface box" that enables information (data) to be transmitted between the keyboard and mouse-clicks and servers, and to be displayed on the monitor and/or sent to the printer. This means that the satellites will not have to be concerned about things like hard drives and memory—among the first things that go bad. That part of the processing, that they handle, will be done on servers at the Center, meaning there are fewer aspects of the system for the kids to break. Also the sites will have less equipment to maintain. In addition to this, the sites will not have to acquire and update software. That becomes the responsibility of the Telehub. This frees up the satellites to concentrate on what they do best, i.e. operate their programs.

In addition to this, all of the participants will be given a username and password that will allow them to access their files from any station in any of the satellites. They will have their own "virtual system" on the network. The students who are participating in the Telehub, regardless of their parent site, will be able to do their homework on the word processor housed on the Telehub's servers at any of the sites on our network. They will also have Internet access that will enable them to do research on the World Wide Web. And so the process goes. Again, as we like to say: "We are limited to our collective imagination."

At the time the idea of the Telehub was conceived there were other approaches in operation to bring the urban core into the Information Age. Some of the churches opted to go with some of the more established organizations and methods. We were fortunate to be involved with the Swope Corridor Renaissance (SCR) neighborhood organization that had churches in it that had the confidence in us to go along with what we were proposing. (Also it probably helped that Harrison's mother, Margaret May, was the chairperson of SCR at that time and belonged to Covenant Presbyterian Church.)

It didn't take long for the word to spread about what was taking place. As mentioned earlier, Rev. Wallace Hartsfield of Metropolitan Missionary Baptist Church expressed the desire to have his church participate with us when we received the grant from the Department of Education. Also, we made a presentation to the Rev. Emmanuel Cleaver, who had the largest and fastest growing United Methodist Church in Kansas City's African American community. In our presentation to him and his delegation we recalled his role in the inception of the DuBois Learning Center (DLC). He readily expressed the desire for his church to participate with us. When his church became part of our network, that meant we had two of the largest churches in our community participating with our Telehub Network.

Our reputation was beginning to capture the attention of some of the civil leaders and philanthropists in the area. This was particularly true among some of those who had established processes to include the urban core in the uses of computer technology. An organization had been established that had the financial backing of major area corporations to address this need. We were encouraged by some of our corporate supporters to work with it, especially since they preferred to work through only one organization for that purpose. However, when we held discussions with them, it became

clear to us that they were proposing that we, in effect, operate under their umbrella by having us rely on their infrastructure in order to access the Internet. But our objective was to develop our own infrastructure so that we would not have to rely upon anyone else. We had no objections with working with other organizations, but not at the expense of giving up an essential part of our autonomy. Besides, we had a larger vision than what was being presented. They simply wanted to help set up computer centers in neighborhoods with access to the Internet. We were setting up an infrastructure that would, in effect, enable us to become an Application Service Provider (ASP), while simultaneously allowing us to stay abreast of the various advances of the technology and incorporating them whenever possible.

Word had gotten back to us that some of the backers of that organization were asking why they were requesting so much money, while the Learning Center was accomplishing so much with so little, comparatively speaking. However, when the value of the expertise of our volunteers and the amount of time they donated to the Learning Center is taken into account, we may be talking about millions of dollars worth of in-kind contributions. Since we do not have large amounts money to donate, we have to rely on what we do have—each other. In time that organization ceased to exist, while we continued struggling along.

We had been building a reputation throughout community for our work with our youth since 1973. We knew many of the community's ministers and their church members. After all, many of our students and staff members belonged to these churches. Many of the people who were close to us knew people and were familiar with participants in various other community organizations. Our growing reputation came about, in part, as a result that familiarity.

Meanwhile, the word of the Telehub Network project that was taking place at the Center was beginning to get out into the community, especially among the churches. We had tutored a lot of children of churches in our community over the years, and I would like to think that many of the church members took pride in our achievements and appreciated our efforts. So with the advent of the Telehub Network, many of them were supportive and wanted to participate. Several churches were approaching us about getting connected to the Telehub. At the time of this writing, we had over twenty churches and organizations wanting to participate. The only thing holding us back was funding.

I remember once talking with Harrison, when the Telehub was in it embryonic stage, about the need for resources to accomplish some of our objectives. I can recall him saying that he was not worried about it. He said, "I noticed that ever since I've been up here, whenever we really needed something, something always seems to have come through." I have since dubbed that "Harrison's Hypothesis." Now his hypothesis would get an acid test. There were three major areas that were pressing us to obtain more resources:

1. the additional expenses for utilities required by the Telehub,
2. the continuous necessary upgrading of hardware and software,
3. the desire to bring more sites onto the network.

With respect to the first two, Harrison's Hypothesis seemed to be holding up. The third one, however, was testing our faith.

General Electric (thanks, at least in part, to efforts of Phil Cole again) awarded us a grant of $150,000 to upgrade our equipment. That now made them our largest overall corporate contributor to date. (Which was Phil's often stated goal.)

However, there were other forms of donations made to the Learning Center. The corporations, where some of us worked, contributed various forms of hardware whenever they made upgrades. General Electric donated several printers that we shared with our satellites. When Harrison worked for Health Midwest, they donated several 17-inch monitors, copiers much better than the ones we had, and other forms of hardware. They were a non-for-profit organization at the time that later was bought out by a for-profit organization. Their IT division was going to be taken over by the IT division of the new organization, so they made a substantial donation to us of a variety of hardware and other IT equipment that they were going to either upgrade or salvage. Also, Sprint had donated some servers to us when they made an upgrade.

I mentioned earlier about equipment that was not the latest versions. However, for the stage we were in, the hardware donated to us enabled us to make a tremendous improvement of our system. And again, we were venturing into territory that no other community based organization that we knew of was venturing into. So a lot of the equipment donated to us was on a level that most community based organizations could not even use.

I have discussed how the Learning Center was essentially self-reliant in its initial stages. But now we were moving into a stage whereby we had to engage the larger community if we were to accomplish the objectives we were envisioning. We also found that when you demonstrate results and show resolve, there will be those in the larger community that will extend to you a helping hand. This is because they realize that in the long run, it will benefit them also. As is often stated, it is in everyone's interest for the urban core to improve academically. And it is important to have an educated workforce in the community in order to attract industry and businesses. So it is more than simply a humanitarian effort (although that too was surely part of their willingness to help us).

As we began to acquire more and more hardware and equipment, it became necessary for us to manage our storage area. Initially Franklyn Williams (one of my cousins and a student in the DLC during its first years of operation) took on that responsibility. He cleared out our basement area, and organized and arranged the equipment stored there. Meanwhile, George Walker had begun talking with another of his fellow associates at SBC, G. B. Gray, a communications technician, about what was going on at the Center. G. B. became involved and interested in working with the storage area and the management of our hardware inventory. When Carmen Witherspoon took on the responsibility of coordinating the equipment for the wiring projects, she too got involved with that phase of the process, but with emphasis on making sure that the wiring projects had the equipment and supplies they needed for their jobs in a timely fashion.

As the word of Telehub Network began to spread through the community, we were often called upon to explain to people and various organizations its concept and the benefits it held for our community. In turn they would ask about various possibilities and

offer suggestions. Typical among them were inquires about software that could be loaded on the servers that they were interested in using. Of course we conveyed to them that as long as it was network compatible it could be done. The Swope Parkway Church of Christ had us load a version of the Bible on the server. Lisa Cole, of Metropolitan Missionary AME Zion, asked about installing some software that would enable her to teach a course on filling income taxes online, which we were able to acquire and do. We received and installed some software so that a class could be offered on banking and investing in the stock market. And so on and so on. Again, as we often say, we are limited to our collective imagination.

In addition to this, as previously stated, we began to offer a series of computer related classes: the windows operating system, the Microsoft office suite, webpage design, computer graphics, computer maintenance, etc. After observing the growth of the Telehub Network, Harrison became interested in us becoming able to offer courses that could lead to Cisco certification. (Cisco Systems is a company that supplies the routers which enable the network to transfer data between the various computers, servers and work stations via the Internet. The demand for personnel that could administer their system was so great that they could not wait for the colleges and schools to train them. So they sought to set up or certify their own training operations which they referred to as Cisco Academies.)

Harrison May was able to become Cisco certified when the company he worked for, Hallmark Cards, sent him for the training. And after some negotiations with Cisco Systems, the Learning Center was designated as a Cisco Academy. So after the Center procured and set up the equipment necessary for the classes, Harrison set up a schedule for people to receive the training to become Cisco certified. A little later, Hallmark sent Jay Williams to receive the Cisco training and now we had two persons trained to offer Cisco courses.

Our primary goal was to work with middle and senior high school students. Ron Craddolph taught an introductory class so that students could develop the technological background that would enable them to step up to the Cisco classes. But we also held classes for adults wishing to further their education in Information Technology. And this would prove to be an additional benefit to our Telehub Network. As they acquired the knowledge, Harrison, Jay and Aaron would give them assignments to help administer the Network. This provided more hands to help with the network maintenance.

Ed Howard, one of the adults who signed up to take the Cisco course, delved right into it. He soon became one of the students that Harrison relied upon to assist with the system and network maintenance. Ed, who hails from Guam, offered to become a part of the DLC's computer staff. Part of his work with us had him constantly running to the basement seeking out spare parts to replace computer and other equipment. Consequently, he soon developed a good working relationship with G.B. Not long after that, Ed and G.B. became the main managers of the hardware storage area. (After a while, Ed's work ethic along with the knowledge he was able to acquire within the Cisco classes and his work with our system and network enabled him to land a job with the US Department of Agriculture's IT Section.)

Another one of the adults who took the Cisco class was Xiaomei Yao. She had earned her PhD in computer Science from a school in mainland China and was a volunteer in our computer section. She works for the dental school at the University of

Missouri at Kansas City, and her husband, Xiaoyu Tan, is a researcher in the medical school there. She saw an opportunity to expand her knowledge and signed up for the course. She soon became active in using that knowledge to help our administration staff, among others, with their usage of the computer applications on our network.

Clearly the Learning Center was reaping huge benefits from its Cisco Academy. But what about the Cisco Academy itself? Its growth was putting more and more demands on its staff. It required laboratory as well as lecture work. Fortunately for us, Marcus Johnson-El, who was a member of Swope Parkway Church of Christ, became interested in taking advantage of the opportunity to sign up for the Cisco Academy. His demonstrated interest in the lab work involved in the academy eventually paid off for us. While going through the program he would regularly help his fellow students with this part of their training. And having gone through the academy, this manifested interest of his led him to eventually be over the laboratory aspect of our Cisco Academy.

We also began to develop relationships with area institutions of higher learning that had programs in Information Technology. Sanford Brown College (now Colorado Technical University) formed an arrangement with us where their IT students do their internship at the Learning Center. Therein they would help out with the system administration and other various projects. Also, Devry Institute would have some of their students do class projects at the Learning Center. This provided us with extra hands and help with the system administration as well as support for the Telehub Network.

General Electric has a program where their associates select a community-based organization for them to volunteer on Saturdays to upgrade their facility's building and/or grounds. Thanks again to Phil Cole, they selected us for one of their projects. We were very fortunate to have them as they landscaped our grounds, gave some of our classrooms a fresh paint job and even retiled our main stairway. That really spruced thing up for us!

Most of the support we receive from the white community tends to come by way of the corporations, government or philanthropic organizations. However, there are a few exceptions. Ron Bowers e-mailed us from our website (http://www.duboislc.org/) expressing that he liked what he saw and that he would like to work with us. We replied to him inviting him to the Center. He came one Saturday and talked with us. When we realized his proficiency with data bases, we immediately asked him to work with our computer and administration staffs. He began working with the computer section in general, and with Terri Moore on the administrative side in particular, to set up databases for both the students and the staff. By the way, Jerry McEvoy, mentioned earlier, of the Swope Corridor Renaissance (SCR) and St. Louis Catholic Church, whose support has been invaluable, is another one.

The year of 2001 saw the beginning of an exciting new program that was spearheaded by SCR under the leadership and guidance of Margaret May and Jerry McEvoy. The four churches of the Corridor and the DLC came together to conduct an eight week educational and recreational summer program for our youth.

The program was set up such that the Upper Room at St. Louis Catholic Church had the students going to the first and second grades, the Swope Parkway United Christian Church had the third grades, Covenant Presbyterian had the fourth, Swope Parkway Church of Christ had the fifth and sixth, and the Learning Center had the seventh and eight. All of these locations were a part of the Telehub Network, and this

was the first time that we all came together to work on an encompassing project of this magnitude. MeEvoy oversaw the proposal writing that enabled us to secure the resources so that this program could continue year after year. The following year the churches in the "Linwood Cluster" would join in the program that we now named the "Urban Campus." What this program really did was to demonstrate to our community just what was possible with the concept of the Telehub Network. In scientific terminology, we had now reached critical mass. We had begun "stepping into tomorrow."