

Chapter Four: Steppin' Out

Freedom, Inc. is a political organization in Kansas City that sprung up from the grassroots and has had a tremendous impact on the Greater Kansas City Metropolitan Area. I have often stated the Freedom Inc. should be studied. One telling observation is that it was founded by independent Black business people: Leon Jordan, board chairman, owned a bar; Bruce Watkins, president, was head of his family owned funeral home; Howard Maupin, treasurer, owned a barbershop; Fred Curls owned a real estate agency; Leonard Hughes, who named the organization, had a law firm; Harold Holliday, Sr., who later became the board chairman, after the assassination of Leon Jordan, also owned a law firm; Rosemary Lowe was a beautician. That put them in a position to operate in what they perceived to be the community's best interest without fear of retribution with regard to their livelihood.

A generation later, after the founding of Freedom Inc., the W.E.B. DuBois Learning Center was founded. And somewhat similarly, it too was founded by individuals who were either independently employed or who were professionals earning a salary comfortably above subsistence pay. Likewise, we too were able to engage in our "community/activist" activity without having to consider constricting strings being attached. It was pointed out in the earlier chapters just how Freedom Inc, played a significant role in us being in the position to accomplish many of the things we are able to do today. Being able to provide a technological infrastructure of the "Urban Campus" was one of them.

However, with growth there come situations that cry out to be dealt with. The load demands placed on the network required us to update our hardware and software. We were able to get some help from area corporations, in particular GE and Microsoft, in that regard. But the computer uses of the summer program put a lot of demands on our staff to support their activities as well. At first we only had one person, Elton Gumbel, to handle that support. But the demands on him were getting to be too great. Fortunately for us, the Kauffman Foundation made resources available for us to get Elton some help. Fortunately for us also, was the fact the Kelvin C. "KC" Simmons had taken the courses in Cisco certification offered by the Center and was available to come and work with us.

KC had been attending a class offered by the Association for the Study of Classical African Civilization (ASCAC) that was held in the Learning Center. While there, Bill Grace had been talking to him about the Telehub Network and it had sparked his interest. When he found out about the classes offered in Cisco, he asked if he could sign up. As they say, the rest is history. For KC showed great interest and promise in mastering the subject matter and when the other network support position opened up, it was offered to him. He accepted it even though it was part-time. However, there is no doubt in my mind that the rate at which we were growing, it wouldn't be too long before it got upgraded to full time.

In the meantime, some other significant things were happening in the rest of the Learning Center. Tracy Warren had enrolled her two sons in the Center's math, reading and science programs. During the orientation she became aware of our need for more volunteers in our administration staff and offered to help. When Von Elston and Terri Moore found out that she was a vice principal at De LaSalle High School here in Kansas

City, they immediately sought out her knowledge and expertise. When Ron Bowers offered to help us develop our data bases, Terri and Tracy were the main ones to participate in that effort. When all of this is taken into consideration it seems as though Harrison's Hypothesis was operating for us in more than just financial concerns. A synthesizing and cross-fertilizing within the Learning Center was taking place that foreshadowed exciting things to come.

As the Telehub Network began to come together, several things began to happen. Among them, as stated before, were inquiries that we were getting more and more of about participation. Another was both inquiries and observations as to the various ways it could be used. All of these things generated an impetus for us to reach out and expand our horizons.

◆◆◆

"Steppin' Out" is the opening song on the Steel Pulse album, "Earth Crisis." Ronald "Stepper" McQueen, the bass player, lays down rhythmic, pulsating lines throughout the tune. Its opening lines exude self-confidence:

*Steppin' out
(Repeated four times.)*

*Open says a me,
Here comes Rasta man.
Abracadabra,
Catch me if you can.*

Notice that he does not say "sesame," the word used (symbolic of how the sesame seed bud opens up) in the Tales of the Arabian Knights story that permits whoever says "Open sesame" entry into a secret cavern. He says, "Open SAYS A ME," in other words, because HE says so, as if to imply that he wants "out" of a situation that he's contained "in," or that he just refuses to be held back.

He's a self-confident RASTA man who knows himself (as DuBois alludes to in the quote in the "Prelude") that's declaring he is "stepping out." Then defiantly says "Abracadabra" (a word used by magicians before a magic feat), "Catch me if you can."

So it is with the DLC's Telehub visionaries. They too are self-confident as to what can be achieved with their understanding of the wonders of telecommunications technology, and how it can be used to benefit our community. They have insight into what may seem like magic to others, as they confidently go about implementing their vision.

◆◆◆

In the very process of becoming a part of the DLC's Telehub Network one begins to acquire an understanding of what the Learning Center is all about, especially for those not fully aware of what we do. One such case was when the Non-Denominational Greater Corinthian Church of Christ became a participant. When their representatives became aware that we tutored kids, and had an established track record in doing so, they expressed a desire to have a tutoring program in their church as well. So we, in keeping

with our desire to help uplift our community, worked with them to help them establish their reading program.

However, where we really began “steppin’ out” was when we were able to establish a satellite in Detroit, Michigan. One of the things I had been doing as the technology coordinator for NBUF was keeping them abreast of what was happening at the DLC with our Telehub Network. Although they would all politely listen to me, I could tell that many of them at that time did not really understand everything I was talking about. When an NBUF central committee meeting was to be held in Kansas City in 2002, I saw an opportunity too good to pass up. I knew that members of our Detroit chapter were involved with institutions that worked with youth and, significantly, had their own buildings. So I called them and suggested that they bring some technical people to the CC meeting, whether they were actually members of NBUF or not. Fred Reeder and Marvis Cofield of Alkebulan Village were some of those who came.

I made a presentation at the meeting, but it was in the social gathering after the official meetings were over that some serious dialogue about the Telehub Network took place. After some discussion on how the Telehub was working here in Kansas City, the talks turned to how to bring Alkebulan (ancient Egyptian for “land of the Blacks”) Village on board. I went on to explain that just as we were spreading the Telehub throughout Kansas City, that they could do the same thing in Detroit.

It turned out that Fred had checked out our computer labs during the lunch break of the CC. There he just happened to meet and started talking with George Walker about Alkebulan Village getting hooked up with us. When George found out that their computer lab had a DSL connection, he told Fred that all they needed to be up and running was a Virtual Private Network (VPN) box. To be honest about it, at that time I didn’t even know what a VPN box was, and I’m sure that Fred didn’t either. But there was George running it down.

Fred and his Detroit delegation expressed the desire to not only become a part of the Network but to be the venue through which it spreads throughout Detroit. Now it was just a matter of getting the ball rolling. The process of getting them hooked up, however, became a trying experience.

After we obtained a VPN box, got it configured, and sent it to them, we discovered that they did not have anyone available to them in Detroit who could finish hooking it up to their system. Fred offered to pay someone to hook it up for them. I then asked him, “How much would it cost?” I told him, “If it cost more than a plane ticket, we could send one of our guys up there.” Between Alkebulan Village and the Learning Center, we were able to make arrangements for George Walker and Jay Williams to go up there and get the job done. The feature that attracted them the most was the ability to access software that enabled them to test and track their student’s reading levels. And now, as a result of their success, we could entertain the concept of going national!

Since then we have held discussions with interested parties in several other cities. However, the city that took us up on getting involved was Chicago. Toriano Granger is the national secretary for NBUF and he is also a mechanical engineer. He took up the challenge to spearhead the task of getting NBUF’s national headquarters hooked up to the Telehub Network. He was fortunate to have Vincent Johnson, an NBUF member in Chicago who works in IT to help him in the process.

In the process of developing something like the Telehub Network, there are often collateral benefits, as well as opportunities and possibilities that occur and can be taken advantage of. I have always thought of the DLC as being somewhat parallel to a university. In addition to academic pursuits, research is done and skills are learned that can lead to the establishment or spin off of entrepreneurial ventures. One such opportunity occurred when the owner, Jack Bey, of the company we worked with that set up and installed the equipment (including antennas and dishes) for the wireless connections, said to me that he was thinking about retiring and that his kids were not interested in continuing on with his business. That meant that we would have to find some other company or person to handle that aspect of the work needed in order for us to continue to expand the Telehub Network.

I immediately thought of Ajamu Webster, the same staff member who led the survey that enabled us to acquire our property and led to all of this. He now owned his own civil and structural engineering firm, DuBOIS Consultants, Inc. And his firm was the one that we had relied on to coordinate the erection of the tower (the “Beacon of Hope”) that enabled the Telehub Network to obtain a wider reach. Webster held talks with Jack Bey and also did some research on the future possibilities of wireless telecommunications. Realizing the opportunities in this emerging field, he set up a new branch of his firm, which was called “DuBOIS Wireless.” Francis “Frank” Herndon, Jr. and Michael “Mike” Russell took on the business and technical responsibilities, respectively, of getting things up and running.

Before long we felt as though it would be good if we held some brain storming sessions to get a handle on where we were and the direction in which we should head. Webster, Herndon and Russell of DuBOIS Wireless, and George Walker, Harrison May and I from the DLC’s Telehub Network met regularly on Tuesday evenings. Gloria Fondren, who had a grant writing business, was invited to participate and help facilitate the sessions. And Leah Russell, our CFO, occasionally attended also.

We discussed in more detail our objectives of working with non-profit community organizations, including churches and neighborhood organizations, the concept of working with small businesses, and individual homes. We went over the possibilities of conducting training sessions for businesses. The more we brain-stormed the more we realized the need to expand our facilities (Harrison had been telling us that we needed a larger building) to accommodate the rate at which we were evolving. What we were becoming aware of was the fact that even though we had the capabilities (i.e. skills and talent) to accomplish our dreams and visions, what was holding us back was our lack of resources. Nevertheless, we still proceeded to put together some plans for a new building. Again we relied on the expertise of Ajamu Webster and Henry Glass (a mechanical engineer who works in the construction industry and tutors geometry in our math program) to guide us through the process. Things were moving right along. Various opportunities and possibilities were opening up for us. We were involved in several activities and were operating on several fronts.

As a consequence we began receiving suggestion from our supporters that we should establish an advisory board. It was in 2003 that we turned to Phil Cole to spearhead this task. We approached the various corporations that had been supporting us to send representatives to be on our advisory board. We also approached area businesses,

community organizations, politicians, etc. that had been supportive of us to participate. The advisory board usually meets on a quarterly basis. They have been helpful in sharing information that has been quite useful. Several of the political representatives have shared with us information about programs designed to help out with education that we are in a position to take advantage of. The representatives from the corporations shared with us how we could take advantage of and apply for recourses that they had set up to do similar things. The discussions and interchange that take place has enabled us to develop innovative strategies in our efforts to move forward, and to take advantage of opportunities that are available that we sometimes would not be privy to. In addition to that, the cross-fertilization and networking that has taken place has enabled us to expand our visions in way we may not have otherwise.

An example of this may stem from some of the discussions we are holding about partnering with some of the area corporations to set up computer centers in rural areas; or to become a facility to train their associates in updating their skills. With regard to this last concept, many corporations realize the necessity of there being community based training facilities to help prepare the local workforce to update their knowledge and skills because of the continuing advance of the technology. Several of them have become aware of the capabilities of the Learning Center's Telehub Network as a result of these meetings. And we began receiving invitations to discuss the possibility of us participating with them in this capacity.

There are other benefits and relationships that developed as a result of both our relationship with area corporations, and having members and supporters of the DLC who were associates therein. The emergence of the Black Family Technology Awareness Association (BFTAA) was a case in point. As indicated by the name, this organization's mission is to address the technological awareness of African Americans by focusing primarily on families. It was organized by Tyrone Taborn of Baltimore to put on programs that promoted the concept and is strongly supported by IBM and Verizon. An SBC executive became aware of it and thought it was a good concept to get involved with. He called it to the attention of effervescent George Walker. He was encouraged to organize some interested people, including some of his SBC associates of their Community Network and members of the DLC's Telehub Network, to kick off their initial activity. During the month of February (traditionally, Black History Month) the group, which held it meetings at the Learning Center, decided to conduct a week of activities that highlighted the role and benefits of technology in the everyday lives of people. Each day had a different location and theme, including education, health, youth, and a recognition program for area persons that had made a contribution in the field of technology.

One of the persons so acknowledged was Harrison May for his vision and work in the establishment of the Learning Center's Telehub Network (and by-the-way, yours truly for my work in helping to found the Learning Center and my work in the mathematics program that ultimately led to the establishment of the Computer Department and the Telehub Network).

As a result of the success of this activity, the interest it generated, and the need that was being addressed, the group decided to proceed to establish and organization so that it could carry on this mission. Among the other groups that were enlisted to join in

were Sprint's Diamond Network, the Black Data Processors Association (BDPA) and other persons that shared the mission's objectives.

Back to the event: it was our good fortune to be introduced to Craig Nulan who shared a spot with me on a panel discussion on how the technology can be used to benefit our community. Craig, a Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) computer science graduate, was impressed enough by what he heard about the activities that were going on at the DLC that he wanted to get involved with us. His coming happened at an opportune time. For what had been happening at the Center was the initial steps to establish an Internet based radio station. And Craig had an interest in working with pod-casting. Now while all of this was going on, Marcus Brown, who works with media education at Genesis school, was usually video taping many of our programs, along with his students. Also Ken Mosley, an electrical engineering graduate from the University of Missouri School of Mines at Rolla, had now taken over the technology responsibility of DuBOIS Wireless. He too was participating with BFTAA, and had become a volunteer at the DLC who was also interested in working with the radio project. Clearly one of the collateral benefits of the BFTAA to the Learning Center was its association with "fellow travelers" and its developing network of technology savvy persons.

The radio project had been conceived as a result of a conversation I had with Keidi Obi Awadu of LIB Radio (Living In Black, www.libradio.net). He had seen our website and gave me a call. (We made arrangements for me to have a discussion about W.E.B. DuBois in general, the Learning Center and our Telehub Network on his show.) While engaged in the telephone discussion we talked about the concept of establishing networks throughout the country whereby his feed could be rebroadcast in local areas. When I brought this concept to the DLC group, they became interested. However, it was in an NBUF meeting where discussions were held concerning the acculturation of our youth that I mentioned the talks the DLC was having regarding the Internet radio that the concept took root and began to grow. Attending that meeting was Sharon Jackson, who worked closely with the PTA at the J.S. Chick elementary African Centered School. She took the initiative to organize the project. George Walker and I were participants in the effort with her, although our role was primarily with the technology infrastructure.

Unfortunately, due to family illness with Sharon, and the energy the BFTAA project required of George and me, the radio project became stalled. Fortunately, however, Trent Bell took up the mantle. Trent is an electrician who is both a long time Learning Center and NBUF member. He reactivated the meetings and this time we had even more people interested in participating. Among them were NBUF members Diallo Jefferson, Julian Love and Claude Hawkins, and also Osco Bolton, a former gang member who now mentors young people. Now we had a good working team that welcomed Craig and his talents with open arms.

But there is more: Lani Charles and Veronica McDaniel are members of BFTAA who joined the Learning Center's reading staff. Lani was a former student in our science program when she was in high school. She majored in journalism and works for SBC. She fondly remembered her experiences while at the Learning Center and wanted to give back. Veronica was a former elementary school teacher who also worked for SBC and saw this as an opportunity to work again with our youth. It is noteworthy to point out that while attending BFTAA meetings at the Learning Center, they had on occasions engaged in dialogue with Elton Gumbel about our reading program. As a consequence,

they saw where their participation not only would be appreciated but simultaneously would satisfy their desire to work with our youth. Needless to say that Linda Watkins, the director of our reading program, was thrilled to have them join us and so too was the rest of the staff, especially Elton.

All in all, BFTAA has been a boon to the DLC in many ways. It has developed a tremendous network that we have been able to pipe into. As it puts on programs, it also helps inform members of the community about the happenings at the DLC. It therefore provides somewhat of a marketing function for us. In addition, several of its members help us out in other capacities. Sherry Lumpkins, who has a web-page designing business, has offered to help Calvin Robinson with our web page maintenance and classes. Tracy Brunston helped facilitate a workshop when we held a retreat. Claresta Lewis (whom I consider an expediter supreme) regularly cooperates with us to get things done. Theresa Adair has offered to help students prepare for their ACT and SAT examinations, and to help maintain our “Black College” web site. And there are many other examples far too numerous to include here.

We are beginning to receive many inquires from corporations, individuals, entrepreneurs and others as to how they can work with us or form a relationships. Russell Bronston, a member of BFTAA who works in IT and has a web-page hosting business, witnessed such an occasion and suggested that we should set up a committee to evaluate such proposals—and to determine the feasibility and what it would take to work things out. He is also acquainted with Leah Russell, our CFO, so, as of this writing, they have been charged with following through with working up his suggestion. So clearly, as people see the advantage of working with the infrastructure set up by the Telehub Network, these inquiries will continue to come our way. And our Telehub Network will continue to evolve. As we like to say: “We are limited to our collective imagination.” And our collective imagination is propelling us forward—it’s the motive force that keeps us “Steppin’ Out.”