DOWN TO THE WIRE

Nonprofits help lead the charge to create a more wired Pittsburgh
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Alyson Blackburn  Student
A year ago, the 16-year-old from Perry Traditional Academy had trouble getting access to anything more than a basic computer. But on this Wednesday night in February, after a full school day and dinner at home, Blackburn is wired up in the multi-media room, surrounded by Apple iMac computers fitted for high-speed Internet access, sophisticated video cams, recording equipment and enough software to create film festival–caliber movies. At Community House, she is one of the fortunate few, a regular at the center since age 5. She has basic computer knowledge from school and home. But neither teachers nor parents have the resources to supply the sophisticated equipment that surrounds her at the center.

“I thought I knew a lot about computers,” says Blackburn as she makes editing cuts to a two-minute documentary about how family has influenced what she values in life. “But I didn’t know a regular computer could do all the things I’m learning here, especially in video production.” Blackburn’s mastering of more complex software and equipment has produced benefits in other areas of her life. Mentors at the center say she is unusually articulate for her age and a quick study when it comes to taking textbook concepts and applying them to real-world situations. She’s even set a new production challenge—making a much longer documentary on her experiences with the Mary L. Stone Program, which introduces promising African-American high school students to predominantly black colleges.

Blackburn’s story—of a North Side teenager discovering a whole new world of opportunity and at the same time learning more about herself—could be repeated thousands of times every day, according to leaders of neighborhood development groups and area educators. How? By making Community House’s access to technology the rule rather than the exception, helping all nonprofit groups across southwestern Pennsylvania bridge the digital divide with affordable, efficient access to high-speed transmission technology.

Since 1996, The Heinz Endowments and several other foundation partners—including Richard King Mellon, Jewish Healthcare, Grable, Buhl and McCune—have been inching the two sides of the digital divide closer together with a Technology-For-Learning strategy that involves library systems, schools, community groups, homework-help programs and adult literacy organizations. The goal is to...
provide high-speed Internet access and training so that people have greater access to learning opportunities.

For many other cities, where telecommunications companies wire communities based on their ability to produce a steady stream of income from paying customers, Pittsburgh’s ongoing effort has been unique: a grass-roots campaign led by nonprofit groups and foundations. “The strategic challenge—to find ways to get around hefty costs and ensure equal access for all—is daunting,” says Dr. Doreen Boyce, president of the Buhl Foundation and one of the leaders in the community wiring effort. But accomplishing it, she says, would position the region for incredible quality-of-life gains.

“One of our most important grantmaking strategies involves finding ways to promote computer literacy, which leads to all kinds of opportunities, from an individual getting a better job to a neighborhood group having more influence with City Hall,” says Gerry Balbier, Education Program Officer at The Heinz Endowments. “For students and for working adults, being connected to a computer network is as important as being connected to a transportation network for school and job.”

In Pittsburgh, where a recent America Online survey found the city and its environs to be first in the country in computer usage by young people, the stakes couldn’t be higher.

“We’re dealing with children coming out of fractured areas—children with only one parent, drug problems, incomes below the poverty line—but these kids still have so much hope,” says Community House Director Wayne Peck, who also serves as senior pastor of First Allegheny Presbyterian Church, the organization’s sponsor. “If we can give them better levels of support and better (technology) tools, that puts them in the middle of things instead of being marginalized. And that gives them higher expectations,” says Peck.

While young people have the most to gain from bridge building across the digital divide, other constituencies also stand to benefit, including civic and issue advocacy groups that stand to have more influence over public policy. In the offices of 3 Rivers Connect, an Endowments-supported nonprofit that is both think tank and activist in the Pittsburgh wiring effort, the goal is to create an “Information Commons.” Executive Director Ron Gdovic says that most of the group’s current projects revolve around the notion of a virtual town green. “You would be able to visit the Commons and find the Little League schedule. You could get into a virtual argument with your city council representative. Then you could check out the greenmap for the best places to mountain bike in the city. It’s all about convincing government agencies and private companies to share their information, then developing a tool so that information from various sources intermingles and flows freely to the public.”
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Gerry Balbier  Education Program Officer, The Heinz Endowments
The grass-roots partners and funders who have kept Pittsburgh in the race among cities for “most-connected” status have a lot of obstacles still to overcome. While the recent AOL survey and a Progressive Policy Institute study show significant Pittsburgh youth involvement with computers, a more business-centered “computer literacy” ranking of cities is not so positive. Yahoo! Internet Life magazine’s annual ranking of the country’s “Most Internet Savvy Cities” this year again excluded Pittsburgh from its top 50 list. The city did move up from last year’s 78th slot, says Don Willmottt, the magazine’s technology editor, and San Francisco, San Jose and Austin continue in the top three spots.

Willmott says the magazine’s measurement process includes more than just Internet use and the numbers of high-tech jobs in the community. Additional benchmarks include how many businesses are online and how well local governments are employing Internet technology. In the case of Pittsburgh, its city government presence on the web is judged average in comparison to slick connectors like Boston and Austin. More important regionally, the city government has gotten mixed reviews for its first significant hard-wiring effort related to the cable franchise agreement.

Local equal access advocates were in the thick of complex and occasionally cantankerous negotiations that went on for most of 1999 before a 10-year cable television and high-speed wiring agreement was signed with telecommunications giant AT&T. Tough questions remain about costs that will determine how many of Pittsburgh’s nonprofit community groups will be hard-wired and what the degree of access will be.

Leaders in community efforts to close the digital divide by providing computer and Internet access across the income spectrum also must deal with the generational spectrum. At the Vintage Adult Care Center in East Liberty, a group of older women have put aside knitting needles and yarn from one class and taken up mouse clickers and keyboards in another. Staring squinty-eyed into computer terminals, eight web-surfing newbies are learning their way around the Internet. It’s one of six classes offered throughout the year in subjects ranging from basic computer use to managing personal health care on the Net.

Instructor Milton Nance, assisting a computer class “freshman” above, remembers the moment he was shocked into realizing that there is no age limit to learning opportunities—especially in computer literacy. In the spring of 1999, his first year as the lead instructor, Nance was addressing a class of seniors at the opening of a basic computing course when he came face to face with his third-grade teacher, by then in her 80s, sitting comfortably at one of the desks. “She was primed and ready to go. I was the one who was intimidated,” he says.
The controversial contract requires the telecommunications company to build a high-speed, or broadband, fiber optic network. Part of the pact provides for an Institutional Network, or I-Net, encompassing 88 community groups in the city that would be connected to the system and with one another. This was a significant accomplishment at the time—few if any cities elsewhere in the country had won similar concessions as part of their cable franchise agreements—but in exchange, AT&T also won the right to charge I-Net members hefty installation and monthly access fees.

Now, as AT&T is lagging behind schedule in installing fiber optic cable around the city, nonprofits, schools and libraries are getting impatient. Groups not included in the original I-Net agreement—and many who were—are also wondering how they can gain affordable access once the grid is completed.

Stepping into that “affordability divide” has been The Heinz Endowments, which, since 1999, has invested more than $1.5 million in special program and operating support to 3 Rivers Connect. The most recent grant—for $500,000—has gone directly toward finding ways to help community groups get connected to the Information Network.
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Dan Cohen  Former Pittsburgh City Councilman
“What impresses us is that these groups are willing to go to the mat every now and then with some heavy hitters in the public arena to ensure that they be given affordable access to this public resource,” says Balbier.

Among efforts being led by community groups is an alternative strategy to use wireless technology to provide them with fast, affordable access to the Internet. 3 Rivers Connect and a technology consulting organization called Information Renaissance are exploring this approach in a pilot project involving Community House and two similar organizations—Hosanna House in Wilkinsburg and Hill House in the city’s Hill District.

For these community groups that have been hampered for years with long waits due to low-speed Internet, the 10-megabits-per-second wireless connection is a godsend—more than 178 times faster than the old hook-up speed. For aspiring students like Community House’s Blackburn, the new wireless technology is what makes “Digital Storytelling,” the program on which her video filmmaking is based, possible for large numbers of students in reasonable time frames. The wireless connection pilot also makes it possible for Community House to share its program with the other groups, and for Hosanna House in turn to share material from its job-training lab.

“In many respects, the wireless option may be the better bet because it allows us to move around private vendors of cable services and fiber optic wiring where costs are unpredictable and service is unreliable,” says Balbier.

Other cost-defraying options on trial at 3 Rivers Connect include a bulk-buying effort that allows community organizations to get group rates on high-speed connections, and a service menu option allowing groups to pay only for modem speeds that they need. In the financially strapped Wilkinsburg School District at Pittsburgh’s eastern edge, a Grable Foundation–supported program supplies computers and training for high school students.

These efforts taken together represent the essence of what 3 Rivers Connect’s Gdovic describes as “a multiple-layer, multiple carrier, multiple transport model that’s making a dent in the digital divide.”

Former Pittsburgh City Councilman Dan Cohen, a key negotiator on the city’s cable contract with AT&T, says that while Pittsburgh’s experience has not been perfect, the grass-roots foundation–city government–nonprofit partnerships are moving the city to a higher level of interaction. “After all, it isn’t just about the Information Network itself, where you physically connect a group to the pole that’s outside the building,” says Cohen, who now works full-time negotiating cable franchise agreements for municipalities across the state. “The effect of this is that communication power in this town is going to be running at a higher power and a much higher speed. The potential for groups to be able to interact with residents, for people to learn and be informed about issues, is tremendous, and we’re only now getting a taste of what is possible.”

Enhancing family connections is a key goal of foundation work in bridging the digital divide. Raven Branch works on her story project as mother, Marta, looks on.