

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT NOTES

CLOSING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE IN McDERMITT, NEVADA

by Patrick Goff

Editor's note. *We had the pleasure of meeting Patrick in Albuquerque, New Mexico at the Economic Development Administration's E-Commerce/Digital Divide Conference. Upon hearing his presentation, we asked him to submit a narrative of his amazing success in bringing high speed internet to the rural town of McDermitt, Nevada. Please visit the McDermitt-Humbolt Internet Provider site at www.m-hip.com.*

The Digital Divide was alive and well in McDermitt, Nevada before some innovative people got the idea of how to make a small bridge across it. There was nothing but long distance dial-up connections before the year 1998 hit the big town of McDermitt (population 373). The K-12 school had around 70 Internet capable computers at that time, and were accessing the Internet in the business room on four computers through a third party proxy server software package and a 28.8kbps modem.

The project started as a "what if" scenario between the principal John Moddrell and myself, a lowly computer/business teacher Patrick Goff. We bounced some ideas back and forth and found out that we could pursue high-speed Internet access from the T-3 line running right through town. You see, McDermitt sits on the Nevada/Oregon border (with the school in Nevada and the football field in Oregon) and we couldn't access that

fiber line since we weren't in Oregon. An Oregon Utilities company provides the telephone service, and they can't provide T-1 accesses across state lines.

Well, we finally found a way to gain access to the Internet and broadcast it across our LAN. There is a two-way satellite service that we looked into and is operated by a company called Intellicom. We get 128k upload speeds and between 2-4Mbps speeds on the download speeds. Now this service isn't cheap and those of you in education know that the school or the district can't go around spending \$1,700 a month on Internet service.

That is when I approached some of the students at McDermitt High School. I asked them if they thought that we could break even on the reoccurring monthly costs if we sold the Internet service to the public. The students sounded positive, but they still sent out brochures to the McDermitt people and the surrounding rural communities that call McDermitt through a local call. We got 50 people that responded and said they would love it, but we needed 70. We had 10 dial-up phone lines that cost us \$40 a piece, which brought the monthly total up to \$2,100. The students and I decided that we could sell the service for \$30 per month and that would still be reasonable for this area, thus needing the 70 people.

The students decided that they didn't want to be a student-based enterprise, but they wanted to be a

full fledged business. I said that we would pursue it and that they would be responsible for filling out all of the paperwork. So, there we were getting ready to become a business when the students decided that they wanted to become a Nonprofit Corporation. Who was I to hold them back? I have all of the time in the world! Ha ha. So now we are the only high school student-run ISP in the world that I know of. Amazing what kids/young adults can do when you let them.

The corporation was set up with eight board members; six department heads, each of them run by students; the vice-principal; and myself. The departments are as follows: Accounting, Communications, Office Administration, Web Page Management, Technical Operations and Maintenance, and Apprenticeships. The Accounting Department's job is to make sure the billing of the customers is done promptly on the 15th of every month, keeps track of delinquent accounts, and pays the monthly reoccurring costs. The Communications Department takes care of all of the presentations we do, as well as creating ads to go into the county paper and corresponding with our customers and our providers. The Office Administrator takes care of all the minutes at the board of directors meetings, updates the agendas and meetings pages on the web site, fills out forms and paperwork concerning business, etc. The Web editor's job consists of updating and building the pages for

our business as well as the other rural schools by using Microsoft FrontPage. The Technology Advisor is in charge of taking care of the computers within the school and community. He/she needs to have a basic understanding of Windows 95, installing programs, networking, TCP/IP settings, and working with modems and setting up dial-up accounts. And the Apprenticeship Department goes around to each of the heads of departments and trains under them for a specific job. It works really well.

What happens when the students who were heads of departments graduate? Thanks for asking. We have an application that is given to sophomores where they can apply to HIP (Humboldt Internet Provider) and sit through an interview by none other than the current board members. Each board member asks a question to the applicant, and the board member who the student is applying to learn under asks the applicant three questions that are job specific. This allows students to sit on both sides of the table of going through an interview before they reach the work force.

The project has been very successful, with our 70-person goal reached by the third month of operations. We currently serve 192 customers and have 30 phone lines and modems that they can dial-in to. We lowered our rates to \$25 a month in May of 2000 and hopefully will be able to lower them again within the next year.

I know what you are thinking. They have 192 customers paying \$25 a month and are making \$4,800 and are only paying out \$2,900 in bills. That's pretty good for a Nonprofit Corporation. So, what happens with the other \$1,900 dollars? Tahiti? Cancun? I wish! No, the money left over goes to upgrading with the equipment and our most important budgeted item: the first Humboldt

Internet Provider Scholarship fund, where employees for the Corporation can apply for scholarships to post-secondary education and will receive up to \$1,000 dollars for every year they apply. It is a great benefit for the students since they are not paid a wage throughout the time working for HIP (Humboldt Internet Provider). This gives the incentives of a little help down the road.

So, where is the digital divide in McDermitt, Nevada? Well, it is only a ditch right now thanks to the hard work, dedication, and risks of two older adults and five young adults.

BIOGRAPHY

Patrick B. Goff is a Computer/Business Teacher and Head Boys Varsity Basketball Coach at McDermitt High School, McDermitt, Nevada. He received a BS Secondary Education, Endorsements in Business Education and Earth Science and M.Ed. in Industrial Technology at University of Idaho, Moscow, Idaho. He can be reached at pgoff@hcsd.org.