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Bringing broadband to low-income communities

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Amid the economic downturn in the city of Detroit a few decades ago, the late Father William Cunningham, a local Roman Catholic priest, had a keen insight.

He observed that the aging brain-trust of local auto engineers was without apprentice successors. At the same time, inner-city youth were dropping out of Detroit's high schools at record rates. Rather than seeing two separate problems, Cunningham saw one solution.

In creating a visionary and now-famous vocational job training center known as Focus: HOPE, Cunningham sought to tap the wasted energy of Detroit's inner cities and harness it, like a fuel-efficient engine, to the heart of Detroit's automobile economy. Today, Focus: HOPE is an award-winning organization that trains armies of new engineers, has become a major Department of Defense supplier and even helps feed hundreds of thousands of struggling Americans.

Cunningham had created a mini-renaissance by simply and brilliantly lighting a match where it needed to be lit. And if there was ever an environment ready for a modern day reincarnation of Focus: HOPE, it's the miracle — albeit only a potential miracle for all too many today — of broadband technology.

Broadband has literally changed the way we live. It's not just that we can get any news or form of entertainment on demand — any place at any time. It can bring the best medical care to patients in remote rural areas and the homebound. It can bring the best educational materials and teachers to students in low-income communities.

Here in Houston, Beatrice Gonzales Garza of the Association for the Advancement of Mexican Americans has taken a page out of Cunningham's playbook by teaming with the Comcast Digital Connectors program in partnership with One Economy to bring the digital revolution to low-income communities through the same educational models Cunningham used. Their goal is to bring a digital renaissance to challenged communities within Houston.

The power of broadband is nearly everywhere. Thanks to hundreds of billions of

investment dollars — more than \$120 billion in just the last two years despite the global economic downturn — broadband Internet technologies are now available to more than 90 percent of American households. While there are tens of millions without health insurance as costs soar, the average cost for broadband has dropped to around \$39 a month. Even lower-cost broadband service tiers at \$15 to \$20 per month are widely available. And broadband is available in multiple ways, from phone companies, cable companies, wireless companies and — in remote regions — satellite companies.

Part of the reason for this success has been a light regulatory touch by the government. The 1996 Telecom Act spurred competition among builders of broadband networks. In 2004, then-FCC Chairman Michael Powell articulated four “net neutrality” principles to ensure openness on the Internet while promoting competition and investment in newer, faster networks. The principles were formally adopted by the FCC in 2005.

But while broadband is ever more available, there's a bigger barrier to our ability to make the most of it. Only 63 percent of Americans subscribe to broadband at home. Recent studies show that a staggering number of senior citizens, minorities, disabled and non-English speakers are unconnected. Broadband can improve our health care, our education, our productivity and make us all more connected — but that's only for the plugged-in.

The question then is how we can light the same match for broadband non-adopters that Cunningham lit among would-be engineers a generation ago? Bringing digital literacy to the neighborhoods is the critical first step. With a year-long program of three classroom sessions a week, the Comcast Digital Connectors program in Houston is turning low-income teenagers into digital publishers, entrepreneurs and students hungry for knowledge.

The Digital Connectors program is only a start, but already it has created 3,000 “digital evangelists” across America who have contributed more than 56,000 hours of service in local neighborhoods. Other organizations, like the United Way, the League of United Latin American Citizens, and others are also making commitments to digital education, and a newly formed coalition of leading civil rights organizations — the Broadband Opportunity Coalition — has made digital literacy and broadband adoption its highest priority.

Comcast and One Economy are expanding the program to 21 additional cities throughout the U.S. this year to help excite imaginations of unconnected Americans across the country. The goal is to create a viral grass-roots model with huge potential to get more Americans connected.

Cunningham “broke the code” by exciting the imagination of high-school drop-outs. This, we think, is the secret to promoting broadband adoption — showing the unconnected just how dramatically broadband can change their lives, both professionally and personally. And that's a goal behind which Democrats, Republicans and independents can rally.

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