

COLUMBIA LEARNING CENTER

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Prologue

The purpose of the following profile is to describe the community-initiated effort that took place in Columbia County beginning in 1994 and resulted in establishing the Columbia Learning Center in 1996. It is hoped that this profile will provide a model for other communities that are striving to achieve access to technology as one element of improving the quality of life and the fabric of community. It should be understood that every community is unique and consequently will divert from this model. However, this profile intends to communicate the flavor of Columbia County's determination to access the benefits that result from telecommunications.

The Beginning

The genesis of the Columbia Center project was the desire of a Columbia County philanthropist to build a new home for the St. Helens Public Library. The library had a minimal collection, an old-fashioned card catalog and no space for special programs. Diane Chaney Kem, had always been an avid reader and enjoyed the challenge of learning. She was dissatisfied that her community did not make the quality of its library a higher priority and believed that the situation could be changed. She did not want to build a new library only to see the community not use it. Diane spoke with her family and closest friends for many months about her desire to build a new library that would be valued. After much thought, and especially close consultation from her oldest son, Michael Kem, Diane formed the Columbia Roundtable. The dozen community leaders in this ad-hoc group came from schools, government, businesses (large and small) and civic organizations. The Columbia Roundtable discussed the traits of quality libraries, strong schools and successful communities. The members desired to coordinate the needs, strengths and resources of all sections of the community. They found the Roundtable was a vehicle for broad-based visioning and for building community synergy. The members also discussed models of learning and the revolution resulting from the growing role of technology. The Roundtable decided to expand the goal of building a new library by designing a community learning center that also had space for public meetings and events, and a technology center with classrooms, publicly accessible computers and a local gateway to the Internet. The Roundtable built a vision and an ultimate goal of building a strong and successful community that would be poised for the future. Building a tradition of volunteerism and giving became intrinsic both to the concept of strong community and to the real work of building a new learning center. The Roundtable stated that its mission was "to enhance life-long learning and build permanent bridges connecting all groups of the community." Building a community learning center would be the first step toward this goal. Diane Kem agreed to donate the first \$1 million needed for the project. The Roundtable set out with plans to raise another million dollars. Diane, who had always contributed quietly to educational projects throughout Oregon, did not want recognition for her gift. She believed the community would value the learning center and library more if it had genuine ownership in its creation. The Roundtable began the work necessary to carry out its dream by retaining an architect to design the learning center. It also formed the Columbia Foundation as the official non-profit group with financial and legal responsibility for the project. Negotiations began with the city of St. Helens for it to continue to operate the public library in a building owned by the Foundation. The city supported the project by donating property in its McCormick Park and agreed to maintain and operate the new building after it opened. Volunteers called upon by the Roundtable formed a building

team, a public relations team, a fund-raising team and a technology team. They began working with the Friends of the Library and the Library Advisory Committee, the two active groups advocating for library services. In November 1994, nearly two years after Diane Kem first began to consider making her donation, the Roundtable announced the project to the community. On Nov. 18, 1994, the Roundtable held an announcement reception at the existing St. Helens Public Library. There, with nearly 100 community leaders present, it unveiled an artist's rendition of a 12,700-square-foot building named the Columbia Center.

Assembling the Tools

The Roundtable and the Columbia Learning Center board turned their attention to building an organization that would be capable of managing a major capital campaign, a major construction project, and a cutting-edge community technology center. The organization would be volunteer-driven, both in the spirit of community building and because the Roundtable had no operating money. The Roundtable was expanded to accommodate the work that lay ahead, and to allow closer coordination among ancillary groups such as the Friends of the Library. Volunteers with expertise were recruited by Roundtable members. The five-member Columbia Learning Center board established a non-traditional bond with the Roundtable by looking to the broad group to provide leadership and direction, although the Columbia Learning Center had legal and fiscal responsibility for the project. Foundation administration was given attention with tasks completed such as designing a logo, printing letterhead, accepting the donated services of a local accountant, and establishing its non-profit designation with the Internal Revenue Service. Barbara Peschiera, an active Roundtable volunteer, was hired as part-time coordinator. Clearly the largest project facing the Columbia Roundtable, was completion of the Columbia Center. Architect Aron Faegre and Associates made minor revisions as the community supported the initial design concepts. The building's design is in tribute to the wood products industry that has traditionally played a strong role in the history of Columbia County. It's cedar exterior and hunter-green roof are rooted in the hues of the forest. The strong use of natural window light and window bays connect the interior with its park surroundings. A large front porch, rounded terrace and courtyard allow activities to flow to the outdoors. The unique combination of library, meeting rooms, large lobby and classrooms was designed to allow the community to gather and communicate as it learns, an opportunity that was not currently available. The Columbia Learning Center hired R&H Construction as the general contractor in the spring of 1995. A construction contract of \$1.3 million was negotiated, indicating the Columbia Learning Center would have \$1.7 million total capital expenses to open the Columbia Center with minimal equipment. The Roundtable's Building/Design Team was reorganized to evolve into a Construction Team. The Columbia Foundation also completed formal lease arrangements with the city of St. Helens, providing for the city to operate the library and to maintain the entire Columbia Center building, and for the Columbia Learning Center to operate the Technology Center. Tragically, April 1995 brought an unexpected disappointment for the community when Diane Kem suffered an aneurysm. Diane left our company for good on May 2. As Diane would have wanted, the planning and working toward building what was now to become her legacy continued uninterrupted. The four remaining directors of the Columbia Learning Center pledged to increase their involvement as needed to fill the void, and the community vowed to bring her dream of opening "a window to a wider world" to reality. The Columbia Roundtable organized a groundbreaking ceremony for May 24, 1995, with several hundred adults in attendance as well as several classes of school children. The upbeat ceremony was highlighted with entertainment from the St. Helens High School band, which had just been named the best band in the state. Under a warm spring sun, ceremonial shovels of dirt were turned, and with them, the community's attention became focused on the birth of the Columbia Center.

Building Begins

After completing all the necessary contracts and permits, and initial site-work, construction began in earnest the first week of July 1995. The building foundation was poured and the framing completed by the close of summer. Four local lumber companies donated building materials, saving the Columbia Learning Center more than \$12,000, and several local subcontractors agreed to discount their contracts. Roofing began in October, allowing the interior tasks of wiring, plumbing and dry-walling to begin. The Construction Team volunteers monitored the project, responded to questions and changes as they arose, and provided decisions required by the general contractor. A team of volunteers, representing the library and the technology center, was formed to select interior hardware, furnishings and color schemes. A clean-up crew was recruited to give the Columbia Center its initial cleaning in preparation of final inspections. A landscaping team of volunteers began designing landscaping and identifying resources to complete that task after the building opened. The collaborative approach allowed construction to move forward on schedule and under budget. The Roundtable celebrated the one-year anniversary of its official announcement on Nov. 18, 1995, with a potluck reception for volunteers in the Columbia Center with the benefits of heat, but no plumbing. Building inspectors declared Columbia Center substantially complete on Feb. 22, 1996.

Finding Community Focus On Technology

Shortly after the official announcement that the Columbia Center would be built, the Roundtable learned of a federal telecommunications grant that was seeking proposals from community-based projects that would reduce disparities in access and would support new computer users. The Roundtable decided March 1, 1995, to submit a proposal to the Department of Commerce by the April 20 deadline. In order to accurately assess the community's interest in and need for telecommunications access, the Roundtable held a series of focus group meetings. The six, weekly sessions included business, government and school leaders from the entire county. They were led by a professional facilitator who contributed his services as director of The Change Institute. The focus groups produced exciting conclusions about community needs, priorities and solutions. The group summarized its findings with the statement that "Columbia County has an increasing problem of fragmentation and it wants to increase the community's capacity to determine and influence its future." The participants identified telecommunications as a tool in building participation, leadership, education and economic development that would help preserve the rural and independent nature that the community values. The group identified nearly 85 local applications, and types of information and services it wanted on a local network. The group went to work identifying the equipment and infrastructure necessary to perform the applications desired. Although the Columbia Learning Center learned in November, that its proposal was not funded, the Roundtable, and the community at large, found the focus group process to be insightful, and inherently valuable to the work and planning to come.

Building on the Focus

The Roundtable also recognized that its birth had created confusion among several pre-existing library groups. The groups viewed the situation as an opportunity to develop a sense of community cooperation that previously had been absent. The Roundtable further came to understand that the library groups had a history of struggling to find members, a mission and some common ground. The groups agreed to form a Coordinating Committee representing city library staff, volunteers, citizen advisors and the Roundtable. The committee held a series of facilitated meetings during which participants learned they shared many common beliefs and goals for the library. The culture of collaborating promoted by the Roundtable was frequently resisted by a community that had historically functioned in set patterns created by a concern about scarcity. The Roundtable sought to address these situations by listening to fears, finding common ground and inviting new organizations and individuals to participate. This is a difficult dynamic to face, but is inherent.

Community Fundraising

The Roundtable understood that community fund-raising events would not produce the level of funding needed to reach its \$1 million goal. Equally important though, was the Roundtable's desire to involve as many people as possible to contribute to the Columbia Center. The community events that are described chronologically below succeeded in building the community's understanding of the Columbia Center project. They also provided the base of support from which 500 (including 125 very active) volunteers emerged. Fund-raising plans were already in the works before the official announcement of the project and the first community event was held Dec. 10, 1994, when a local jewelry store sponsored "Digging for Diamonds." Golden Fawn Jewelry erected an awning in front of its store where a livestock tub filled with sand held hundreds of hidden cubic zirconia and 70 genuine diamonds. Throughout the day, chances to dig in the sand were sold for \$5 each. The local cable television access station and the local radio station provided coverage during the day. The local newspapers publicized the event and its results. The journalism students at St. Helens High School designed a promotional flier with their new desktop publishing software, and posted them throughout town. The event raised more than \$600. The second community fund-raising event took place February 17, 1995, when a collection of downtown merchants donated a portion of their sales for the day to the Columbia Learning Center as "A Random Act of Kindness." In addition to raising nearly \$400 for the Columbia Center, the event benefited other projects because some merchants directed their random act contribution to other local organizations, an option the Roundtable's fund-raising team suggested. During the following month, fund-raising events were sponsored by the St. Helens Burgerville restaurant. The restaurant sold sections of a paper book worm for \$1 each, allowing children to write their names on them and decorate the dining room. The bookworm covered three walls by the end of the month. Burgerville also held a book fair, with storytelling and train rides. The restaurant raised \$855 for the Columbia Center. Two events took place in April 1995. Elementary school children conducted a penny drive and raised \$180 in pennies for books for the new library. And a local musical group, Live! On Stage, dedicated the \$150 of proceeds from its spring concert to the Columbia Center. During the summer, the fund-raising team participated in two projects designed to educate the community about the Columbia Center. In June, the team coordinated with a local 4-H group to enter a float in St. Helens' annual "Port-o-Fun" parade. Following the "country pleasures" theme, the 4-H group decorated a float illustrating "Charlotte's Web," complete with a baby pig. The float was recognized with the Mayor's Trophy. The fund-raising team also helped with the library's Summer Reading Program. Roundtable volunteers joined with the Friends of the Library and the library staff and volunteers to sponsor weekly events, prizes and to create excitement for children participating. The program climaxed with a picnic and barbecue and saw more children participate than ever before. The next community fund-raising event took place in August when the local computer store organized a raffle. The St. Helens Computer Center donated a \$250 certificate for groceries to the winner. More than 400 people purchased the \$1 raffle tickets. The winner was a single mom who welcomed the groceries. Twenty entry forms were bought anonymously with the local food bank designated as the recipient. The community fund-raising intensified in the fall of 1995. The fun began with a September Kids Night Out event at the community swimming pool. The Park and Recreation District opened the pool up to school children. Project leaders organized crafts, games, food and swimming events for one evening, with high school students conducting most of the activities. The event raised more than \$1,000 and filled the pool literally to its legal occupancy limit. In October, the Columbia Roundtable hosted a comedy show at the St. Helens High School Auditorium. The Slob Sisters, well-known authors and comedians, donated their performance and a copy of one of their books to each person in the audience. The Slob Sisters publicized their performance and the Columbia Center on KATU-Channel 2's A.M. Northwest program. The evening was fun, attended by nearly 300 people and raised \$2,000 for the Columbia Center. November brought a second donation from Live! On Stage when the group donated \$200, proceeds from its winter concert, to the Columbia Learning Center. In November, the fund-raising team organized a newspaper recycling program that is on-going. A local business donated space in its parking lot for the

drop box. The team organized a recycling education component to the project in an effort to increase the amount of recycling in the community instead of competing with other organizations that collect newspapers. A 4-H group designed a flier about the importance of recycling and publicized that they would transport newspapers for seniors or others who were unable to. The project has raised hundreds of dollars, and continues still. The excitement about the Columbia Center continued to build as 1996 began and construction neared its end. The St. Helens/Scappoose Chamber of Commerce held a Trail Blazer Alumni game, and a half-time auction of Blazer memorabilia. Four local businesses formed teams to play against the Blazer team for one quarter each. The mayors of Scappoose and Columbia City served as honorary coaches and the community enjoyed the entertainment. The Chamber donated half of the event's proceeds, nearly \$1,800, to the Columbia Center. January also brought a community-based effort to give the nearly completed Columbia Center its initial cleaning. The contractor would have charged more than \$2,000 to clean the building in advance of the final punch list inspections. Instead, the St. Helens Church of Latter Day Saints volunteered. A local janitorial service provided consulting and ordered commercial cleaning products. Local hardware stores and a rental business donated the supplies and equipment needed. More than 64 adults, and even more children, participated in the cleaning parties over a two-week period. The crews cleaned every window, wiped down every wall, and gave the floors their critical and initial waxing and sealing. The center was full of activity as pre-schoolers played organized games in the children's library and older children pitched in with the work. The crew received an unexpected visit one evening from Gordon Smith, then a candidate for the U.S. Senate. The Roundtable received more help in February when the local theater group dedicated half the proceeds from its winter cabaret show to the Columbia Center. The Shoestring Community Players produced "A Little Night Off Broadway" complete with desert and beverages in the not-quite completed Columbia Center, seizing a rare opportunity to enjoy the new library space before it had stacks, books and furniture. The event raised nearly \$500 for the Columbia Center and brought more than 200 people through its doors.

Translating Moral Support into Financial Support

Even before the Columbia Learning Center had received its official status as a 501(c)3 organization, planning a capital campaign cabinet began. One of the Columbia Learning Center's directors brought a history of experience in fund-raising and capital campaigns. Betsy Johnson provided a game plan for seeking major donations from individuals, corporations and private foundations. She built a "donor pyramid," illustrating the number of gifts that would be needed at each level. The Columbia Learning Center's coordinator researched private and public funding sources and began to assemble materials needed to submit requests to corporations and to foundations. A strategy that outlined possible funders, their deadlines and application requirements was assembled. Proposal writing began in the spring of 1995, immediately after the Columbia Learning Center received its non-profit status. The Columbia Roundtable formed its Capital Campaign Cabinet during the fall of 1995. It also expanded its part-time coordinator position to a full-time development director—still its only paid position. The Columbia Learning Center at this point contracted with a professional consultant to provide advise and feedback during the campaign. The campaign cabinet was co-chaired by Diane Dillard, named First Citizen in 1995 for her many contributions as a volunteer and as Boise Cascade Corp.'s communications manager; Nancy Federici, owner for 30 years of a local shoe store who is active in cultural, political and business organizations; and Dr. Lyle and Dottie Ackerson, who ran a solo, family medical practice in St. Helens for 43 years who together have been involved in a long list of school, athletic and civic organizations. The cabinet chairs and their committees met regularly to identify prospective donors, to learn the skills needed in soliciting donations and to coordinate their efforts. More than 150 local families were identified as high priorities. Most were approached and toured through the Columbia Center during its construction. The cabinet also designed a recognition program with permanent naming opportunities in the building and its furnishings and designed gifts for donors as well as its collateral materials. The cabinet raised more than \$700,000 in pledges of

support. It should be noted that if the Roundtable were to duplicate this project, several changes would have been made. The Columbia Learning Center should have sought its 501©3 designation prior to announcing the project. It also should have begun talking with individual donors and sought pledges of support prior to the public announcement. Furthermore, the community was most motivated to contribute while Columbia Center was under construction, which was a relatively short window, and illustrates the reason for doing more cultivating prior to the start of construction.

Columbia Center Walls Spread Before They Were Built

Among the first spin-offs of the Roundtable's energy, was attention it attracted from Portland General Electric Co. To the St. Helens School District. Both Kathy Wyatt and Fred Miller, key executives in PGE's community activities, were included in the initial visioning of the Columbia Center. They were seeking to impart skills that would build communities' capacities to succeed. After witnessing Columbia County's focus towards working cooperatively through the Roundtable and its interest in bringing technology and new learning tools to the schools, PGE adopted St. Helens High School in its Education Technology Initiative. Participating in that program, along with four Portland-area high schools, St. Helens students formed their own Tech Team to build the school's first networked computer lab. PGE brought hardware and software donated by manufacturers, and expert consultation from world-renown networking pioneer Michael Bookey. The high school students learned to build the network and operate and maintain the hardware. Now completing its third year, the program has grown into a for-profit student-operated business called "Lion Computers" that builds and repairs computers for the school district and installs computer networks in the schools. The students, who had found limited technology offerings in the school district, found a new level of excitement about their potential. Several began to serve on the Roundtable's Technology Team, providing valuable input. The students pulled cable under the Columbia Center's technology center and helped set up Columbia Technology Center's network. The Lion Computer and other students have continued to be valuable volunteers at Columbia Learning Center, learning to operate the help desk, and to assist in maintaining its lab and upgrading its Internet hub. This project provides an example of the synergy the Roundtable hoped to create. The Roundtable's direction was valued by PGE, which in turn provided high school students with a learning opportunity they would not have had within traditional school programs, that ultimately advanced the district's technology, and contributes to the Columbia Learning Center's operation.

Opening a Window to a Wider World

Immediately after the official announcement, the Roundtable organized a technology team to identify the community's computer, telecommunication and training needs, to write specifications for needed hardware, to research Internet gateways and the required infrastructure, to design start-up operations, and to work with local businesses and schools. The effort was led by Ray Murphy, retired owner of the St. Helens retail computer store, who volunteered nearly full-time for a full year. Ray assembled a team of technical experts from multiple community groups who formed subcommittees to tackle the various pieces of its challenge. The team found in-kind resources to allow it to set up a community bulletin board, and then to operate an Internet server prior to the Columbia Center's completion. The technology team surveyed all members of the Scappoose/St. Helens Chamber of Commerce about their computer usage and needs. It worked collaboratively with adjacent communities and counties where telecommunication projects were underway. It formed a home-page team that designed Columbia County web pages, and still continues to design community pages, posting information provided by community agencies. As construction reached its final stages, the Columbia Learning Center board focused more attention on start-up operations of the Columbia Learning Center. It hired Ray Murphy as interim technology center manager, wrote a three-year business plan and began developing operating policies. The technology team is

providing support needed for the Columbia Learning Center to offer Internet service. It is the core of volunteers who operate the center's help desk and it is researching software so it can develop standard instructions for new Internet users. The team built a partnership with Boise Cascade Corp.'s St. Helens mill to use excess capacity of its Internet server, allowing it to test the system prior to moving into the Columbia Center itself. More than 60 local residents used the pilot system and more than 100 others asked to order e-mail accounts as soon as US West installed a T-1 line. The technology team also has laid the groundwork to provide training in the Columbia Learning Center classrooms. Boise Cascade, Armstrong World Industries and Portland Community College have all made commitments to rent the Columbia Learning Center for training and educational programs.

Planning the Transformation of a Library

The St. Helens Public Library prepared to enter a new era in addition to moving into a new building. The library, a city department supported through the city's general fund since 1977, had a collection that was half the size state standards suggest for this population. It had no videos and one out-dated computer. The Columbia Center provided an opportunity for the city's library to receive the attention and support it had long-deserved. The community's determination to improve its library without tax money was welcomed by the staff. Library usage began to increase upon the official announcement about the Columbia Center, and has tripled since it moved into Columbia Center. New members joined the Friends of the Library, and more than 30 volunteers help with library operations. The City Council responded to the enthusiasm by requesting that a private estate that had been donated for library improvements be released. This money will allow the library to automate its card catalog, becoming the first in Columbia County to do so. The conversion is currently underway. In addition, the Columbia Learning Center wrote a grant on behalf of the city that was funded to provide a computer, printer and support so library patrons can directly access the Internet without walking to the Technology Center. These steps will truly allow St. Helens to enjoy a modern library, one that is positioned for future changes in information management.

A Grand Opening

Columbia Center's construction was completed enough for the library to relocate in April 1996 and for the Columbia Learning Center to house its Internet hub. A three-day grand opening celebration was planned by a team of volunteers and the building was officially dedicated April 30, 1996, just one year after Diane Kem had passed away. Hundreds of visitors participated in the official ceremony and in the festivities that followed. Classrooms of elementary school students toured the library, used the computers and enjoyed educational demonstrations. An art show was hung in the building's expansive hallway. Musical groups performed, a barbecue was held and dignitaries spoke to celebrate the realization of a community's dream.

Sustaining and Operating

The Columbia Roundtable continued its fundraising through the summer of 1996 to purchase computers for the lab and classroom. The technology center opened with six PCs. It then received a grant through Oregon Economic Development Department's Regional Strategies program that allowed it to purchase 20 more and software. Columbia Learning Center operates with a mission of "Providing our community with a window to a wider world by enabling learning opportunities within an ever-changing environment." It emphasizes that technology is a tool that has many applications. The technology center operates with a belief that access to electronic information is becoming an essential tool for functioning in community, in school and in the workplace. The primary functions of the technology center are Internet service, computer education, hosting community webpages and providing an open computer lab. Fees are set to cover costs and are kept at a minimum to provide the greatest access to the

technology. Reduced fees are offered to students, seniors and unemployed community members. Internet fees are reduced for educators, public agencies, non-profits and religious organizations. Volunteers continue to play a critical role in operating the center and in achieving its goals. Columbia Learning Center expected the Technology Center would require outside funding during its first year, upon which the fees from Internet subscribers and classes would allow it to operate self-sufficiently. Those financial targets were realized. The Columbia Learning Center hired a Technology Manager in July 1996, allowing Ray to return to his goal of retirement. The technology center had eight Internet lines when it opened, and 128 lines by the end of its second year of operations. The technology center began to teach computer classes in July 1996, using Microsoft Office programs. The classes ranged from "Intro to Computers," to Advanced levels of Access. The classes were advertised in the local newspapers for general community members and were targeted to employees of Boise Cascade, the community's largest employer. A part-time instructor was hired. In the fall of 1996, a Marketing/Education Manager position was created to co-manage the center. Hours were increased to include Saturdays and evenings. The center began to be used by Portland Community College one night each week so it could expand computer class offerings in Columbia County. PCC began to partner with Columbia Learning Center by providing six computers for the lab, a satellite dish for distance learning and limited funds to staff the expanded hours. Just as the community's interest in Internet has increased, so has the interest in classes. Many local businesses send employees to training. Several large employers (private and government) have contracted with CLC to provide customized training or have rented the classroom and provided their own instructor. The schools have asked for customized classes for their teachers and some teachers have brought students to the center for computer education. The center wants to serve as an extension of the schools. The technology center also offers special classes for students, elementary through high school, during summer and holiday breaks. Since opening, the technology center has broadened its class offerings as it has sought donations of software from different manufacturers. The center now has Adobe, Claris, and Lotus programs in addition to Microsoft programs. The center has responded to employers' specific needs for class curriculum and scheduling, and has sent instructors to distant communities when organizations have a teaching facility, but no instructor. The center also offers individual tutoring upon request. The technology center also has added new services in its lab such as scanning, a digital camera and color printing. Use of the lab has grown gradually as more people learn they can use it to write resumes, complete school assignments or surf the net. Students, seniors and unemployed are given 30 minutes of lab access at no charge with a \$2.50 charge beyond that time. The general public is charged \$5/hour for computer time or \$30 for a month of unlimited use.

Conclusion

The Columbia Learning Center has a larger vision for its technology center and its ability to bring resources together for future collaborative projects. Building the Columbia Center has sparked a beginning of building a tradition of giving to community projects. It is the first physical sign of the work accomplished toward building a strong community with life-long learning opportunities and strong leadership skills. Future programs and applications will be limited only by our imaginations. Copyright 1998 Columbia Learning Center.