

Business grads speeding up rural Internet service

by Sheryl Hanson - Friday, September 05, 2008

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For the 20 million Americans who live in rural areas not served by a single high-speed Internet provider, the digital divide is very real.

Lack of access to high-speed Internet limits a person's ability to do business, participate with government and connect with the world. Not only that, but since 2001, the U.S. has fallen from fourth to 15th in the world for broadband penetration.

Advocates warn that this digital divide is not only separating many lower economic classes, ethnic minorities and rural residents from the mainstream in this country, but also separating this country from parts of the world that have leapfrogged the U.S. in broadband penetration.

University of Wisconsin Oshkosh College of Business graduates Franklin Cumberbatch '84, and Mark Dodge '88, are working to change that.

By merging their two companies, Trinidad Group and Granite Wireless, to form Granite Wave, they are hoping to do wireless Internet service what cellular phones did to telephone communications.

The technology fueling the idea is Worldwide Interoperability for Microwave Access (WiMAX), which transmits data through radio waves over long distances.

"It is unlike WIFI, because that transmission is done in a contained environment and the frequency degrades after 300 feet or so," Cumberbatch said.

With WiMAX, voice, data and video signals can travel up to 10 miles. There, a receiving radio transmits the signal to another radio — and another — until the signal is finally broken down to a wireless router at a business or residence.

As CEO of the new company, Cumberbatch primarily is focused on setting the new company's vision and building relationships with municipal leaders.

"Working with municipalities is exciting because we are truly creating a win-win for everyone," Cumberbatch said. "They need this technology to grow their businesses and satisfy their residents, who are asking for broadband service in rural areas to improve their quality of life."

Small towns that agree to contract with Granite Wireless can get the service relatively quickly because using a municipality's existing infrastructure — by collocating equipment — speeds up equipment installation.

The two business partners are already working on their first location: Fond du Lac County. They hope to

have service available in Ripon, Fond du Lac and outlying areas within six months.

Cumberbatch feels strongly that wireless broadband service is an integral part of helping [New North](#) businesses gain international economic strength.

“New North leaders said just recently that they want to share what they have to offer with China,” Cumberbatch said. “Attracting businesses to these areas and retaining those that are already there require using broadband technology to its fullest capacity. It is a critical piece of infrastructure to accomplish that goal.”

Cumberbatch understands what it takes to be successful. In 1979, he left his home in Trinidad and arrived in Oshkosh with a suitcase of all his worldly possessions and \$35 in his pocket.

From those humble beginnings, he found a way to succeed at both academics and athletics, eventually setting the record at UW Oshkosh for the men’s indoor and outdoor 400-meter race. His records still stand today.

“It is one of the longest-lasting track and field records, and it is 25 years old,” he said.

Pretty good, considering Cumberbatch suffered from severe asthma as a child in Trinidad. He began running at age 14 because he heard it could help him overcome the disease.

“My very first race, even 36 years later, I will never forget,” he said. “It was the girls’ 200 meter dash. I came in fifth. I got beat by four girls, and to top it off, I had to walk home with them after that.”

Beating asthma isn’t all he is proud of — he also beat the cold. “That first winter in Wisconsin, I was never colder in my life,” he said, laughing. “But I endured, and I’ve been here for 29 years now.”

Cumberbatch recently reconnected with his former track coach and mentor, Jim Flood, during last May’s NCAA Division III National Track and Field Championship in Appleton. He also met UW Oshkosh Chancellor Richard H. Wells and later took a tour of the Oshkosh Sports Complex.

After seeing the tremendous progress and learning about the need for additional funds to finish the project, Cumberbatch stepped forward with a donation.

“UW Oshkosh gave me a chance. I got pushed in every way — to be a good student and a good athlete. Those were the best four years of my life,” he said.

So it was an easy decision for Cumberbatch to help UW Oshkosh financially with the OSC project — and he challenges his fellow alumni to do so as well.

“Many alumni probably feel it is a good idea to give back to their alma mater, but for me, it is a personal obligation,” he said. “Without UW Oshkosh, I wouldn’t be where I am today.”

Cumberbatch brings many years of business development and municipal management experience to the new company. In 2004, he put his name in the race for Milwaukee mayor. Winning candidate Tom

Barrett later appointed him Milwaukee's senior assistant for economic development, a position he held until 2006.

During that tenure, he worked hard to bring jobs to Milwaukee, especially for two populations "near and dear" to his heart: teenagers and residents of the inner city's minority communities. He's most proud of bringing the Urban Entrepreneur Partnership to Milwaukee, now considered one of the nation's best entrepreneurial programs for minorities.

"Helping individuals begin businesses and create wealth in their communities is the better alternative to government handouts and social programs," he said. "Ninety percent of minority-owned businesses hire minorities."

After he left his post in Milwaukee two years ago, Cumberbatch created the Trinidad Group, a business development firm that takes its name from Cumberbatch's home country of Trinidad.

One of the Trinidad company's many services is wireless broadband, and it was in that arena that he connected with Dodge — for a second time. They had met years earlier in Milwaukee, when Dodge was investigating new call center sites for Travel Guard.

"A colleague of mine recommended I contact Frank because we were both working on developing wireless broadband," Dodge said. "I remembered his voice when we started talking on the phone, and he said, 'You are the Mark Dodge from the call center program.'"

The two hit it off immediately, both as business associates and friends. "Mark is a technical genius," Cumberbatch said. "Even more than that, we just get along so well."

Dodge began his career in the Fox Valley, getting hired by the company then known as Wisconsin Bell. He broadened his IT skills in subsequent positions at Bank One and Sentry Insurance. Later, he joined the Noel Group, where he designed communications systems for companies such as Disney, Wells Fargo, GE and American Express.

"I was traveling the globe installing systems, and I decided it was time to get some semblance of a life back so I could see my family more," Dodge said.

So three years ago, Dodge started [Granite Wireless](#) in his parents' — also UW Oshkosh alumni — hometown of Shawano.

The customer response to Dodge's business was immediate — and overwhelming.

"Small businesses, cities and counties began calling us, asking if we could help implement wireless Internet service."

All this success is not a surprise to those who know Dodge well, such as John Bergstrom, of Bergstrom Automotive, an old family friend from Neenah. Bergstrom was one of Dodge's most influential supporters and mentors.

“I started college studying biology, and John thought I was nuts,” he said with a laugh. “He looked at me and said there is a certain amount of flair in entrepreneurs – that they always have enthusiasm for extremes – and he evidently saw that in me. I always admired him, and between John and my parents, I had very good examples to follow.”

Dodge studied at UW-Madison before transferring to UW Oshkosh. When comparing the two experiences, he feels strongly that Oshkosh offered a superior education.

“It was because of the practical experience I got – that and a lot of great professors,” he said. “The people who were writing the books were also teaching the classes at Oshkosh.”

The flood of interest in Granite Wireless’ services has kept Dodge busy, to say the least.

“What it comes down to is ‘so many opportunities and so little time to make them happen,’” Dodge said. “Everyone wants to know when the service will go live near them.”

Recently Dodge had an opportunity to work with billionaire Ken Hendricks from Beloit, Wis. Hendricks recently passed away, but his influence left a lasting mark on Dodge.

“Ken had an incredible insight into business and people,” Dodge said. “He believed in creating jobs, eliminating waste, preserving value and — most importantly — using all of that to generate jobs.”

Constantly evolving technology is one of the new company’s biggest challenges.

“Our team spends hours and hours doing due diligence before we choose equipment and software that we believe is best of class and a good value for our customers. Technology changes daily so quickly,” Dodge said. “Whatever products are choose, the realization is we are still buying a technology time frame and have to live with the decision for three to five years.”

Although Fond du Lac County is the first combined project on their agenda, Dodge and Cumberbatch have a much broader plan. They plan to expand the service throughout Wisconsin and beyond. Granite Wireless has provided a great foundation, already servicing 28 communities throughout North Central Wisconsin, Illinois and Iowa.

“We think we have a winning business model, skilled management and top-notch employees,” Cumberbatch said. “What sets us apart from many others is that we are focused on rural communities — communities that want access to advanced technology to attract and keep their young, best and brightest citizens.”