



Digital Bridge Project launched at the University of Liberia Campus by President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf

Monrovia, Liberia, 27 April 2007: *The Digital Bridge Project*, which aims to close the digital divide in Liberian universities, made its public debut on Friday, April 27th at the main campus of the University of Liberia when President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf inaugurated the state-of-the-art SocketWorks Limited (SocketWorks) computer laboratory.

Said President Johnson Sirleaf, “The digital center is as a result of hard work, partnership and dedication on the part of a lot of people. It is my belief that ICT can help Liberia leap frog in its efforts of poverty reduction and accelerate our transition into a prosperous nation.”

Completed in less than four months, the laboratory includes 200 computers with access to a university intranet, research databases, and a VSAT internet connection. SocketWorks’ CEO Aloy Chife unveiled the facility and demonstrated its capabilities as students amassed outside waiting for entrance. He detailed how students can now register for courses, get assignments, and pay fees online, as well as have access to the same libraries and research facilities as students in the United States. Previously, University of Liberia students had a small library of books over 20 years old; now they have instant access to the digital archives of the Library of Congress and MIT. Research databases now housed within the University include some 3 million volumes.

“Our aim for the multi-media PC laboratory at the University of Liberia (the “Liberia Digital Bridge” project) is to partner with Liberia to accelerate its transition to a knowledge-based society in which the currency of exchange is information,” Chife said of the project. “And while some would argue that improvements in higher education should not outweigh more basic development needs like roads, water, and infrastructure, the University of Liberia students have higher expectations of themselves and their government,” continued Chife.

The launch demonstration was completed with two live lectures delivered from the University of Maryland in the United States. This “distance learning” capability is a key part of building the capacity of the University of Liberia, and is facilitated by WorldSpace.

When Chife told the guests that Liberian students would now have access to the same quality of education as students at MIT, the room broke out in spontaneous applause.

SocketWorks was founded by Dr. Aloy Chife in 2002 upon his disengagement from Apple Computers, Inc, where he was a Director and Business Chief Information Officer. SocketWorks Limited is a software and outsourcing company that aims to provide packaged ICT solutions to its clients. In the education market, it has developed proprietary software (trademarked CollegePortal) which helps universities automate their processes (e.g. student admissions and registration, course selection, course management, exam management, and facility management) that are currently done manually, and also provides internet access that would not otherwise be available. Dr. Chife, like many of SocketWorks' officers, is part of the Nigerian Diaspora.

SocketWorks utilizes a business model to transform universities in developing countries and does this through student subscription fees. Universities stuck in a paper age are brought into the 21st century through IT, hardware, software and at times, infrastructure solutions. Administrators are connected to teachers, teachers to students, students to information, and parents to the universities.

The program costs the participating universities nothing to implement and the schools get an on-going revenue stream to upgrade their ICT program from the student subscription fees. The program started in Nigeria and now has contracts at 52 Nigerian universities. In Nigeria, students pay as little as \$25.00 per year. The first successful export of the model was to Sierra Leone.

These services are making an enormous difference in Nigeria and across Africa in countries that otherwise have no ICT systems. From a one-man shop, SocketWorks has grown to become an employer of over 300 people in Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, Sierra Leone, Liberia and Uganda, and its products impact the lives of thousands of African Students. It is also expanding operations in Asia and is expected to be up and running in India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka by April. Its institutional investors and shareholders include the World Bank (IFC) and Zenith Bank Plc (the largest Bank in Nigeria).

In post-conflict Liberia, where students cannot absorb a fee increase for education, SocketWorks is self-funding the initial investment and seeking support from the World Bank to subsidize the student subscription fees. This is the first time SocketWorks is changing its business model to accommodate donor subsidies.

SocketWorks has trained a local staff to manage the Liberian facility and administer the data, drawing their personnel from students in the University of Liberia system. And although four months seems a short time to reconstruct and renovate the building for computer facility (including a generator, air conditioning, and a VSAT link), design and install the hardware and software package, train the staff, and digitize the records of all 19,000 University of Liberia students, faculty, and staff, SocketWorks felt that the short time frame for implementation proves their commitment to providing world-class solutions to institutions of higher education in Africa.

When the official inauguration of the facility was completed by President Sirleaf, she left the facility and spoke with the hundreds of students waiting to gain access. "This facility is for you,"

she said. “Be sure that you take care of it, and protect it, because it is your education and your future.” The computer lab was then flooded with eager students.

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