

'We all screamed.' Could four women of color convince corporations to fund research into 'the digital divide?'

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They had no chance.

Who is going to listen to four women of color asking for money — not just bake sale money, they needed \$170,000 — to study the habits of kids and families which had long been overlooked?

Who even understands "the digital divide?" (It's the distance between technology savvy and equipped communities and their poorer, ill-equipped neighbors). Everybody has a smart phone and a laptop, right?

For seven months, Dr. Fallon Wilson, Dr. Samantha Perez, Dr. Hasina Mohyuddin and Pearl Amanfu tried to find someone, first to listen, and then to fund their effort to study the digital divide in Nashville.

They called themselves the Nashville Digital Inclusion and Access Task Force.

The problem was, their force didn't get them very far at first.

They heard a resounding, collective no.

Hearing "no," made them work harder.

What is the digital divide?

Growing up in Houston, Wilson was a smart kid who noticed something about her classmates. When her class was assigned to write papers, many of the other kids would turn in computer printouts of neatly typed pages, while Wilson wrote her papers by hand.

She asked her parents for a home computer.

They gave her a typewriter.

"I was excited," she said.

That
was
her
first



experience with the digital divide.

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Other kids "talked about playing video games," Wilson said. "I knew there was a difference."

She realized the divide was even bigger when she got older (she attended Spelman College in Atlanta). She lugged a big computer monitor in her dorm room. She noticed other students were carrying small, thin computer.

"They make laptops?" she remembers thinking.

Today, she is the CEO and co-founder of Black in Tech, a digital advocacy group in Nashville.

When the pandemic hit last March, Wilson realized communities of color might have problems teaching their children in remote learning situations.

So she called her friends. And together, they came up with a plan.

Would anyone listen?

Samatha Perez, who works for the Nashville Chamber of Commerce, wanted to turn the negative of the coronavirus into a positive.



"How do we come out of this pandemic better?" she said.

That isn't an easy answer when you're talking about the digital divide.

"Some of these kids have no Internet," said Hasina Mohyuddin, an Assistant Dean of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion at Vanderbilt University's Peabody College.

"I was continuously ringing the alarm," Wilson said.

Wilson, Mohyuddin, Perez and Amanfu, who works for Metro Information Technology Services, began having Zoom calls to discuss how to make remote learning easier in underserved communities. They realized what they needed: Data.

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If they wanted help from government and private institutions, they would need to show them facts.



"It would take everybody in Nashville being concerned, not just us," Wilson said.

To collect that data, they needed money. Specifically, \$170,000 to study children and families, making sure Black and brown neighborhoods were part of the data.

The money was the problem.

Lots of groups wanted to help children, but not a lot of groups want to pay to do it.

Comcast said no. Amazon said no. Asurion said no.

As they continued to research the digital divide, they heard about free giveaways of laptops in some schools. That sounds like a great idea until you hear what the task force heard.

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Some of those laptops were immediately sold because families needed money to put food on the table.

They heard about connectivity problems in poor communities. They heard about language difficulties with IT support. They heard from women like Merrie Thompson.

Thompson is a teacher in the Head Start program in East Nashville. She said she lives and works in a neighborhood that is almost all Black and brown.

She said she tries to get her 3- and 4-year-old students to learn on computer apps. But sometimes, she runs into parents who don't understand.

"It's a problem for some of them getting logged on," Thompson said. "Or their hotspots weren't working."

She spends time she could be teaching students dealing with parents who don't know how to use apps. One woman came to her recently with a problem.

"I had to walk her through setting up a password," Thompson said. "She was wondering what a pass code was. She was worried someone was trying to break into her phone."

It's people like Thompson the task force is trying to reach for their input.



Finally, screams of joy

After months of trying to convince corporations that someone needs to study the digital divide, the task force got a nibble.

Google Fiber made a small donation.

"They've always supported Black and brown tech," Wilson said.

And then, in November 2020, they got the call they had been waiting for.

The Frist Foundation funded the rest of the project.

"We all screamed," Wilson said. "We were sending hands-raised emojis."

"I was in disbelief," Perez said.

With Mohyuddin in charge of the research, focus groups began last fall. The task force is currently reaching out to communities all over Nashville to collect data about their tech issues. They are encouraging people who want to participate to contact them at info@digitalinclusionnash.org

They hope to question 5,000 respondents. The work is just beginning.

"We need the community buy in," Perez said. "This (the data collection) is going to last over the next couple of years."

Wilson said she believes there will be more funding for technology (during the President Biden administration), and her task force wants to make sure everyone is on the same page.

"It's going to happen," Wilson said. "The stimulus is coming down to the states. It is my hope that this study will drive how those dollars are spent locally."

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