



REY RAMSEY SEES  
THE INTERNET REACHING  
EVERYONE ON THE PLANET

# ACCESS FOR ALL

BY BILL GLOVIN

Last June, Senator Barack Obama, rising star of the Democratic party, stood behind the podium at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., and cast his considerable charisma over the media launch of the proposed Public Internet Channel (PiC). The website will be the nation's first online network connecting low-income families to critical social services, from information on children's health care coverage to the location of emergency shelters. "If we do this right," Obama told the audience of reporters and Beltway insiders, "the PiC can do for accessing social services what Yahoo! has done for accessing entertainment or what Craigslist has done for accessing local goods for sale."

At his side was the evening's master of ceremonies, Rey Ramsey RC'82, chairman and CEO of One Economy Corporation. Cofounded by Ramsey in 2000, this nonprofit technology organization is the force behind PiC and the reason

PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVID SAUNIER

that growing numbers of disadvantaged Americans are connected not only to the internet but to the socioeconomic mainstream. In seven short years, One Economy has helped 200,000 people living in affordable housing in 42 states receive high-speed internet access through its lobbying efforts and created the Beehive consumer website ([www.thebeehive.org](http://www.thebeehive.org)) used by 10 million visitors to find life-improving online resources. Ramsey, juiced by the buzz



Reynard Ramsey's *Scarlet Letter* 1982 yearbook photo.

surrounding the launch of PiC, his company's latest brainchild, confided afterward, "It's not easy to get Obama to do these kinds of things—he gets about 100 requests a week. It took him all of two days to say yes to us, which says something about the power of the idea."

One year later, it says something about the persuasiveness of Ramsey that both Obama and Senator John McCain—rivals in the 2008

presidential contest—have put aside partisan politics to co-chair a two-year campaign to raise \$20 million and build national support for PiC. "Over these last several months, almost all of the presidential candidates announced they were entering the race from their websites," muses Ramsey, 46, a former corporate lawyer whose transformation into a social-justice entrepreneur was shaped by 15 years' experience in affordable-housing development. To Ramsey, politicians' embrace of the internet underscores the digital disparity that One Economy seeks to address: if you're not online, you're left behind.

As the director of Oregon's Department of Housing and Community Services and at the helm of two organi-

technology and education, the poor, he believes, will remain on the margins of the new economy.

Statistics from the Pew Internet & American Life Project, an initiative of the Pew Research Center, back him up. According to a 2006 report, 93 percent of households with annual incomes above \$75,000 use the internet as compared with only 49 percent of households with incomes below \$30,000. Moreover, internet usage is 91 percent among those with a college education but only 36 percent among those without a high school diploma.

Ramsey, tall, lean, and with a David Lettermanesque gap in his smile, can easily toss out a few stats of his own: "Consider that in America 95 percent of all new jobs require computer skills, 8 of 10 jobs are technology based, and one-third of all Fortune 500 companies only accept applications online. If you don't use technology, it is almost impossible to succeed in today's world."

The One Economy three-step strategy is availability, accessibility, and relevancy. First, make technology available by wiring affordable housing for broadband internet access. Second, make technology accessible through practical support, whether that means lessons on using a mouse or microloans for purchasing a computer. And third, make technology relevant by developing online resources that help low-income people build better lives. One Economy's partnerships with government, nonprofit agencies, community organizations, and private enterprises—from banks to housing developers to telecommunications giants—make it all possible.

But One Economy's story is better told through just one of the many lives it has touched. Barbara Perkins—or Ms. Barbara as she's better known around the Howard Hill Apartments in the rough-and-tumble Anacostia section of southeast Washington, D.C.—met Ramsey shortly after he launched One Economy. At the time, the aging Howard Hill complex was in the midst of a sorely needed \$4-million renovation, one that included necessities like new roofs and new plumbing as well as amenities like a tot lot and a community center. Perkins, 60, a volunteer who runs after-school and summer programs for the community's kids,

calls Ramsey "a handsome, friendly crusader who showed up one day with a lot of energy and ideas" for turning Howard Hill into a digital village.

In the same neighborhood, One Economy's Access Services program wired the Henson Ridge Apartments and convinced a telecommunications firm to offer residents high-speed internet access at discounted rates, as low as \$5 a month. In the community room of one building, One Economy installed a computer lab, equipped with eight PCs, for the use of residents who can't afford their own.

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zations that build homes for the poor—he has served as president of Enterprise Community Partners and chairman of the board of Habitat for Humanity International—Ramsey gradually came to the realization that decent shelter goes only so far toward improving the life chances of those with low incomes. "The more important issue," he says, "is how people in affordable housing can use technology to provide vaccinations for their kids, obtain car insurance, write checks, and pay their taxes—all things middle-class people take for granted." Without access to



Senator Barack Obama (left) and Ramsey discuss the launch of the Public Internet Channel in June 2006, at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C.

Staffing the lab are tech-savvy teenagers, trained and paid through One Economy's Digital Connectors program, who troubleshoot and teach their elders such fundamentals as the location of the on switch and the mysteries of the mouse. The teens can earn a matching grant from a One Economy banking partner to buy their own computers, but, more importantly, they can start to build a résumé—and a more promising future—with the technological and interpersonal skills they learn on the job.

"I didn't know all that much about computers before Rey came along," says Perkins. But now she uses the internet to send email and find recipes and money-saving tips. One resident, she says, used One Economy's national Beehive consumer website to learn how to balance her checkbook, then taught neighbors to balance theirs. Through the Beehive's local links, residents can look for jobs, register to vote, and find a child care provider. Howard Hill kids use the site to get help with their homework and advice on preparing for the SAT and ACT. What's most impressive to Perkins, who is raising her 13-year-old granddaughter, "is how vital the internet and email are to my granddaughter's schoolwork. In the scheme of things, you can't get ahead in today's world without computers."

**R**amsey's mission—to narrow the gap between the residents of Howard Hill and the baby boomers around Dupont Circle—first began forming while growing up in a working-class home in Atco, a South Jersey town, in the 1970s. His parents—his mom was a nurse, his dad a welder—always stressed the value of education to their five children; they "sacrificed and saved money to buy a set of leather-bound encyclopedias," Ramsey has written. "These were not just books; they were the gift of knowledge and an important vehicle for us to get ahead." As a child, says Ramsey, he "always knew" he would be a lawyer.

At Rutgers College, Ramsey's first friends were Jewish classmates who encouraged him to join Zeta Beta Tau. "I was a black, Catholic guy in a Jewish fraternity, but it was completely comfortable," recalls Ramsey, who went on to become the first African American to head the Rutgers Fraternity/Sorority Council. A political science major who was a member of the Cap and Skull honor society and the WRSU news team, Ramsey remembers being particularly intrigued by discussions on the role of government in political science professor Ross Baker's classes.

YEARBOOK PHOTO COURTESY UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES; PHOTOGRAPH BY ROBIN WEINER/USNEWSWIRE



Ramsey (left), former chair of Habitat for Humanity International, working with the organization's most famous member—former president Jimmy Carter—on a project in Pueblo, Mexico, in 2004.

After earning his law degree at the University of Virginia, Ramsey received offers from large firms in New York and Portland and made the decision to move to the West Coast, a choice he chalks up to “a restless, adventurous soul” and his conviction that Oregon offered the country’s “best meritocracy.” In 1986, feeling unfulfilled making money for corporate clients and unconnected living far from East Coast family and friends, Ramsey began to contemplate his place in the community and life in general. When a friend’s cousin invited him to a meeting of a small but promising charitable home-building organization called Habitat for Humanity, “it seemed too good to be true, as I had always had an interest in housing.” That first meeting he remembers as “part church revival session and part smart business seminar,” and within weeks he had become a volunteer, putting together a newsletter, speaking in churches, and doing pro bono legal work for the group in the Portland area.

Ramsey’s work at Habitat inspired him to make the move from corporate law to economic development, a leap made easier by his networking contacts at the Oregon statehouse. After rising rapidly in a series of positions managing ports and regional business development in the state, Ramsey received an unexpected offer from then governor Neil Goldschmidt to direct the state’s Department of Housing and Community Services. “He was unaware of my Habitat experience,” remembers Ramsey, “but said I had the passion and the intelligence to apply the principles of economic development to housing.” At 29, Ramsey had the distinction of becoming the youngest cabinet member in Oregon’s history. Working under two Democratic governors, and undeterred by cuts in the state budget and a conservative Republican house, Ramsey pushed through 14 pieces of

housing legislation between 1989 and 1993, including the establishment of a \$35-million fund that would eventually quadruple the number of state-funded affordable-housing units. Says Ramsey, “I believe in bipartisanship, and this was the fruits of that belief.”

Ramsey was lured to the nonprofit sector with an offer to join Enterprise Community Partners, a foundation that invests \$1 billion each year in affordable housing and community development, as senior vice president. Three years later, when founder James Rouse died suddenly, Ramsey became president. Creating affordable housing took over his life completely when he stepped up his efforts as a volunteer and joined the board of Habitat for Humanity. By then, it had attached “International” to its name and had evolved into an organization with a \$300-million budget, 550 employees, and 20,000 volunteers—the most famous of whom is former president Jimmy Carter. In 2003, the board elected Ramsey to a two-year term as chair,



Ramsey traveled to Durban, South Africa, in February to open One Economy’s first global technology center.

PHOTOGRAPH, TOP, BY BOB CAMPBELL; BOTTOM, ANDREW GRIFFIN

during which Habitat made plans to relocate its headquarters to Atlanta and worked to help people displaced by hurricanes Katrina and Rita. “Habitat built 100,000 homes in its first 25 years,” says Ramsey. “While I was on the volunteer board, we built another 100,000.”

At Enterprise, Ramsey, who was not especially well versed in technology, experienced another of what he calls his “epiphany moments” when young staffers convinced him that the wonders of the internet would soon usher in a new economy and change the world. The lesson coincided with his growing conviction that decent homes would not end the economic isolation of both the urban and rural poor. With borrowed computers and seed money from *Wired* magazine cofounder Jane Metcalfe and the Ford Foundation, Ramsey convinced three colleagues to join him in setting up One Economy Corporation in an office-building basement in Washington, D.C. “Naysayers told us that the poor have little use for computers or the internet,” remembers Ramsey, but he and his partners had a different perspective. “We saw them as folks who were fighting every day to give their children better lives.”

The basement was so cold during that first winter that the One Economy staffers wore gloves in the office and cut off the fingertips so they could type. “When visitors came for meetings, the building’s receptionist would steer them to a fancy conference room on the sixth floor that we had borrowed from another firm,” remembers Ramsey. “Then we would magically appear as if we came from down the hall.”

Within months, the struggling startup got its first big break when Cisco Systems Foundation, the philanthropic arm of the networking-technology giant, agreed to provide One Economy with 13 professional staffers. “Rey was very prepared, convincing, and clear that they wanted to make their nonprofit the nation’s primary force in finding new and creative ways to use technology to help economically disadvantaged people,” says Michael Yutrzenka, the Cisco foundation’s executive director. “They needed staff and equipment, and we gave it to them.”

Ramsey and his partners moved the nonprofit out of the cold basement as grant money began to pour in from Cisco and other supporters. More than 70 large corporate foundations—including powerhouses like AT&T, Google, Microsoft, TimeWarner, and Yahoo!—have since donated millions of dollars in cash and computer equipment. In recent years, powerful politicians like Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton, Congressional leaders (former senator) Bill Frist and Senator Harry Reid, and former secretary of housing Jack Kemp have helped launch One Economy initiatives. “Rey is committed to social and economic issues,” says Clinton, who has worked with One Economy on *access@home*, a \$1-billion nationwide drive to connect 15,000 new affordable homes—and the families living in them—to the digital world. “His countless initiatives to help our nation’s economically disadvantaged are models for thoughtful citizenship.”



In 2005, Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton asked for One Economy’s help in expanding internet access to rural communities in upstate New York.

Ramsey’s biggest challenge these days is juggling his time. Divorced with no children, he is constantly on the road, courting potential investors, forging new alliances, and staking out new territory. In a two-week time frame earlier this year, he hobnobbed with the likes of Tony Blair, Bill Gates, and Bono as a delegate and panelist at the World Economic Forum in Switzerland and then flew to South Africa to launch a global technology center in

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Durban. The center, housed in a public library and equipped with 12 PCs and a network printer, is linked to the local community through its own Beehive website. “This is our first center in South Africa. We hope to create a franchise and open centers across Africa,” says Ramsey. “I call it the Starbucks model.”

Ramsey exudes supreme confidence as he compares One Economy to a snowball rolling down a hill. From four shivering souls in a cold basement, the organization has grown to 60 employees, offices in 10 cities, a \$15 million operating budget, and an equity fund worth \$160 million. In five years, he projects, two million people a month will visit the Beehive, and One Economy will have expanded into a dozen countries. Says Ramsey, “I want people to look back one day and say we helped change the discourse on poverty from ‘helping the poor’ to ‘facilitating the success of the poor.’” □

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