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Martin Luther King Jr. Day of Service

Volunteers' goal: 3 Web sites in 2 days to aid charity

Trade group's members, students to help charities improve online presence

By Erika D. Smith

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In the age of the Internet, seven years might as well be seven decades. Just ask the staff at Progress House, who've been running the nonprofit halfway house with the same, outdated Web site since 2003.

Lucky for them, though, in the age of the Internet, two months *a/so* might as well be two days.

A handful of professional Web developers and students have volunteered 48 hours of their time to build cutting-edge Web sites for Progress House and two other Indianapolis nonprofits.

Their task began Friday and will end Sunday at 6 p.m.

Normally, such an undertaking -- developing a Web site with a marketing video and ties to social networks, such as Facebook -- would take about two months and cost thousands of dollars.

But the volunteers from RefreshIndy, a trade group of about 150 local Web developers and graphic artists, and students from the School of Informatics at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis will do it fast, and for free, in the name of charity.

The event, after all, coincides with IUPUI's annual Martin Luther King Jr. Day of Service, for which students, faculty and staff are encouraged to give back to the community.

But really, the Web design event was the brainchild of Justin Harter, founder of RefreshIndy and president of Web design firm Justify Studios. He pitched the idea to IUPUI officials last fall and recruited volunteers from local companies Squish Design, Web Easy Media and Cassis.

"Typically, developing a Web site can be an intensive process. There's a lot of planning and artistic work," Harter said. "But we're cramming all of this work into a very, very short amount of time."

The staffs of the nonprofits that will benefit from this work have high hopes for what a new Web site will mean for their organizations.

In addition to Progress House, RefreshIndy selected Talbot House, another halfway house for men recovering from addiction, and My Sister's Place, a support center for at-risk women, based on need and on the value of the services they provide.

Bill Kuster, program director for Progress House, said he hopes the new Web site will allow clients to fill out applications online, pay for services online via PayPal and get a virtual tour of the halfway house.

"Our funds are pretty tight these days," he said, "so free is good."

Kimberly Beward, marketing director for My Sister's Place, said she hopes a flashier Web site will do a better job of explaining all the services that the nonprofit provides.

Plus, she said, she's pushing for better search-engine optimization, so My Sister's Place will show up

higher in Google's rankings when people search for terms like "domestic violence help" or "addiction recovery."

"We're really into the phase where we're starting to grow and get our name out there," she said.

Talbot House stands to gain the most of all -- it doesn't have a Web site.

Harter admits that building three robust Web sites from scratch in two days is a tall order. As late as Thursday, he didn't even know if it would really work.

"I wish I could say it's doable," he said, laughing, "but I guess it will have to be."

Additional Facts

Other projects

In addition to the day of service at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, other companies around Central Indiana plan to honor Martin Luther King Jr. Day. Among them:

- **Simon Property Group** purchased and donated an extra table at Friday's Champions of Diversity Awards Dinner hosted by Indiana Minority Business Magazine and the Indianapolis Recorder newspaper at the Hyatt Regency Downtown. The table was occupied by 10 members of the Center for Leadership Development, which has a mission to empower youths and strengthen the community.
 - **WellPoint** compiled educational information about MLK Day and distributed it to employees. The company also will officially observe the holiday, meaning all employees have Monday off.
 - **Eli Lilly and Co.**, for the second year in a row, will help to sponsor the HandsOn Network's national service day in honor of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. On Monday, employees will participate in service projects, such as donating food and clothing to relief agencies and delivering household goods to needy families. The Mary Rigg Community Center, Julian Center, Damien Center, Horizon House and Gleaners Food Bank of Indiana will benefit from the employees' efforts.
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