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Front Page
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Navajo girl finally gets phone line

- S.F. marketer mounts gimmick-filled effort urging Internet users to show their support online.

I just got off the phone with Myra Jodie.

She called on her phone. From her house.

No, it wasn't ``Mr. Watson, come here,'' but as phone calls go, it was a very big deal.

Remember Myra? The Navajo teenager who won a computer in an online contest just over a year ago? She took it home to a northeastern Arizona trailer with no running water and no telephone service and in the process caught the attention of the president of the United States.

But none of that meant a phone and it was beginning to look like she'd never have one.

Well, she has phone service now and she thought she'd ring me up Monday to say so.

``I got my phone today,'' Myra, 14, said, first calmly and then with a little giggle.

Technicians from Globalstar, a San Jose-based company in the satellite phone business, installed about $1,000 worth of equipment Monday morning and instantly connected Myra with the rest of the world. The company agreed to cover the $1-a-minute charge for a year and then consider continuing the help.

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Letters to the Editor

Myra said her family had heard from Globalstar last week.

``This morning they came by," she said, meaning came by Ganado High, which she attends on the Navajo reservation. ``They said they were going to install it."

Globalstar's entry brings another dramatic twist to a remarkable story. Talk about rags to riches -- or riches to rags. On the same day the company installed the phone, Globalstar told the Securities and Exchange Commission that it might shut down by the end of the year if it doesn't raise more cash.

Ed Hirshfield, a Globalstar vice president who coordinated the installation, said he was optimistic despite the company's gloomy forecast.

``I think that a company that is planning to survive for awhile, has to do business as though it will survive," he said late Monday. And providing phone service to remote regions is part of Globalstar's mission.

There is nothing easy about this story and Myra learned that long ago. She's lived her life on a rugged reservation, a West Virginia-sized chunk of Arizona, New Mexico and Utah where fewer than a quarter of the homes have phones. It's a place where running water and reliable heat are not a given. Unemployment is high and poverty is deep.

Still, Myra didn't have time Monday to worry about far-flung financials. She had to learn the new phone system. By Monday afternoon, she'd already checked her e-mail. Her mother, Marcella, had already called her sister, who lives near the Grand Canyon.

You might not give checking e-mail or calling your sister a second thought. I didn't until I met Myra just over a year ago. She was a face on the digital divide. A determined face with a bright pair of eyes on a teenager who made the honor roll, played in the band and was a star pitcher for her school softball team. She was the face of a young woman who plans to attend Notre Dame or Harvard and she spoke for many.

It seemed Myra might never get a phone, despite heartfelt efforts by many dozens of you who first read her story last March. The irony of her computer prize reached the White House, and President Clinton invited Myra to introduce him when he traveled to the reservation last April. Myra did beautifully. But it did not get her a phone.

Hirshfield said Globalstar executives were taken by Myra's story when they first read it a year ago. They thought about ways they might help, but they didn't yet have the ideal technology. Their talks with Navajo tribal leaders moved slowly.

Then Hirshfield saw my column last month, which recounted Myra's last year: Winning the computer. Meeting the president. Appearing on a game show. And still having no phone.

``It spurred us to move more rapidly," Hirshfield said.

Not only that, by March the company had improved the technology needed to bring satellite phone and Internet service to Myra's trailer on the reservation.

So, Globalstar is a hero here, but this story is packed with heroes. They give reason for hope that the so-called digital divide and even older divides might be bridged by those with good hearts.

Readers have written offering to donate money to the cause. And you would think money would have done it, but the problem takes lots of money. No phone wires run near Myra's home. Bringing them several miles to her would cost tens of thousands.

But in the past year, satellite systems became more practical. Frank Paniagua, CEO of AutoNetworks in San Ramon, and Sandy Colony, a vice president with StarBand, based in Virginia, said last month that together they would install a StarBand satellite system that would provide Myra with an Internet connection. They agreed to pay for a year or more of service.

But, they graciously backed off when they learned that Globalstar was preparing to offer both Internet and telephone service.

And there were heroes on the reservation. Heroes like Ella Earl, Myra's eighth-grade teacher, who let students surf the Web at school when they were finished with their school work. Myra was often finished early and she entered the Web-based computer giveaway at school. It took representatives of contest sponsor Awz.com, of San Jose, weeks to track her down because she had no phone. Awz has since gone out of business.

All along, Myra has said she's thrilled to have the machine. She's seemed a bit bemused that people made something out of the fact that she had the computer, but no Internet connection. So many of her neighbors had nothing more than she had.

So, of course, if you're looking for heroes, there is Myra, too. She

never complained. Never asked for help, really. But help has arrived.

I know, because Myra called to tell me.

Contact Mike Cassidy at mcassidy@sjmercury.com or (408) 920-5536.

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ATTACHMENT B

Engineering Certification

I hereby certify under penalty of perjury that I am the technically qualified person responsible for preparation of the engineering information contained in the foregoing "Comments of Globalstar, L.P. and L/Q Licensee, Inc."; that I am familiar with the information contained therein; and that such information is true and correct to the best of my knowledge and belief.

Signed this 20th day of October, 2001.

David E. Weinreich
Spectrum Manager
Globalstar, L.P.

CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE

I, William D. Wallace, hereby certify that I have on this 22nd day of October, 2001, caused to be served true and correct copies of the foregoing "Comments of Globalstar, L.P. and L/Q Licensee, Inc." upon the following parties via first-class United States mail, postage prepaid:

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