

WiderNet tries to cast wider net

WiderNet program may donate iPad knockoffs to needy African students.

By **MAX FREUND**

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A satellite Internet connection can cost a staggering \$150,000 a year for people in Africa, but Cliff Missen, an associate director of the University of Iowa School of Library and Information Science, and his WiderNet project have a potential solution — sending the the continent used computers and databases.

To celebrate WiderNet's 10-year anniversary this semester, members screened the Liberian documentary *Pray the Devil Back to Hell* in the IMU on Sunday, said Rachael Haesemeyer, a publicity intern and UI student. This year, the group is focusing on Liberia, which has emerged from two civil wars in the last 21 years.

"They are just beat up, and literally, the infrastructure is shredded," said Missen, the program's director. "You can go downtown and just see telephone poles absolutely full of bullet holes."

But in addition to its recent focus on Liberia, WiderNet has donated more than 1,200 computers and 25,000 books to developing schools in numerous African countries over the last 10 years, Missen said. The total computer hardware donations are valued at \$1.2 million; funding depends on donations.

One of WiderNet's greatest successes, the eGranary Digital Library, is a

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WiderNet Numbers

WiderNet has celebrated its 10-year anniversary, and lots of people have pitched in.

- Total external grants: \$2,767,539
- Total hardware/software donations: \$1,177,344
- Number of participants in training events: 4,746
- Volunteer hours since 2001: 13,613
- Authors who have given permission to distribute their work: 308

Source: www.widernet.org/reports

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collection of 14 million documents on a single hard drive. Missen said most eGranary databases go to African universities. This year, it's getting an upgrade.

"On one hand, we want to grow it from 14 million to 30 million resources," Missen said. "On the other hand, we want to shrink it so it fits inside a cell phone."

The group is also looking at using cheap \$80 iPad knock-offs from China as a way to place millions of documents in the hands of students.

Unlike eGranary's original setup — a static database of information — there is now an option for users to create pages and blogs and upload

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See video of people at the Sunday night screening at www.dailyiowan.com.

them to their local eGranary for other users to access, Missen said.

Ultimately, he said, eGranary is the best alternative to Internet for these schools.

"Telling a poor person who doesn't have books that he or she should get the Internet is like telling someone who has no water that he or she should drink Perrier," Missen said.

WiderNet also accepts and distributes donations of computer hardware and literature.

When volunteers pack up a shipment of computers for Africa, they line the box with donated books along

with bubble wrap.

"What is funny is they are excited about computers, but they are more excited about the books," said Alba Anderson, the volunteer coordinator.

WiderNet has a "scrape farm" where donated computers get cleaned seven times. That way, donators' private files are erased, Anderson said.

After 10 years of consisting on donations, volunteers, and creativity, Missen said, the project will continue to grow.

"We get grief because we are not there enough, that they need more," he said. "There's a lot of pressure on us to get this out there faster and better."