

Cyber-pals

E-mail helps transcend intergenerational barriers

By Janet Meana
The Grand Rapids Press

The 17-year-old boy and the 74-year-old woman had been sleuthing via e-mail for two months.

There were few clues, but Mary Helen Price had deduced that her cyber-pal was a male when he revealed he was the last of his line to carry the family name.

Price also let unintentional clues slip into her e-mail. Mentioning a retired husband was a big one, and Jon-Paul Bernard concluded his mystery friend was a woman in her late 40s or early 50s.

Bernard and Price were one of six pairs of cyber-pals who took part in a program that brought inner city high school students and senior citizens together in an exercise that would teach both groups how to use e-mail, as well as improve written communication skills.

The innovative project, set up by Philanthrotech Inc., a West Michigan nonprofit that uses technology to provide enrichment opportunities to children affected by sickness, disability or poverty, perked interest in the students from Union High School and the senior citizens from Heather Hills Retirement Village in Grand Rapids as to the identity of their secret e-mail buddies. Both sides were instructed not to divulge personal information.

"I'm keeping it as tough as I can for them," said Philanthrotech founder Randy Bassin, who says he enjoyed listening to each group's speculation as to who they were writing to. "The genders keep flip-flopping from week to week."

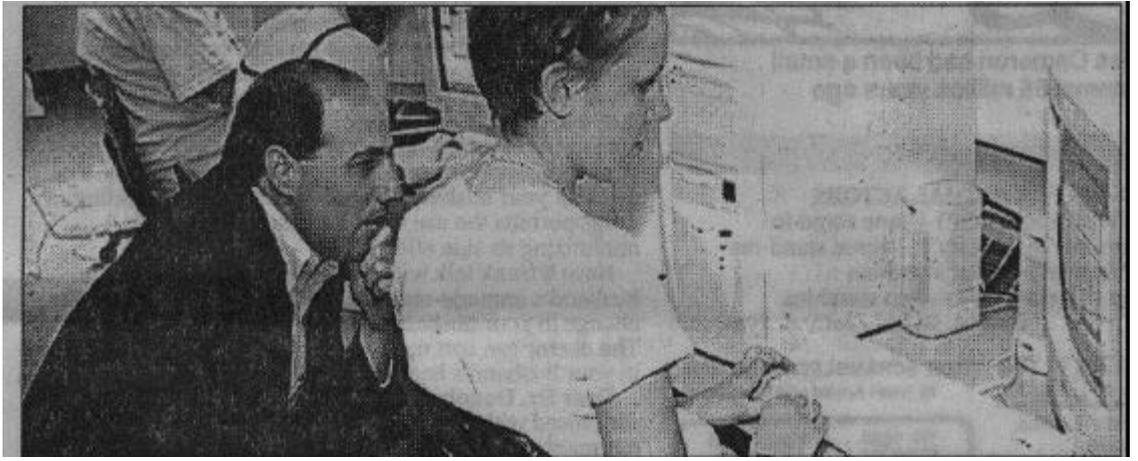
Building bridges

By maintaining anonymity, Bassin hoped that cultural and generational barriers would be lifted. The students did figure their partners were from the Grand Rapids area, however, when Roger's Department Store and Holland's Tulip Time were mentioned.

"It's excellent for the kids and fun for us," Price said, soon after the project started. The senior citizens did have a bit of an advantage, because they did know they were corresponding with teenagers.



Crystal Nowak, 16, meets her e-mail buddy, Mary Tidwell, 78.



Randy Bassin helps Lindsay Myers, 17, decide what to write.

PRESS PHOTOS/JANET MEANA



Grace Nelson gets a helping hand from Randy Bassin and volunteer Sonya Evenson-Ford.

While the students have computers at school, they don't have access to the Internet and e-mail. The school's computers are old and slow, according to teacher Merdis Harris, who says she is concerned that her students must compete for jobs against other students who have the advantage of learning on updated computers.

"I tell them what it's like in the real world and hope they can carry that vision with them," Harris said.

A popular project

The hardest part of the project was choosing which six students were going to participate.

"Everyone wanted to do it," she said.

For the project, US Interactive, a nationwide developer of Internet-based technologies and commerce, donated six brand new, state-of-the-art computers to Philanthrotech. Three were placed in the high school and the others in the retirement village. After the program, the computers will be used elsewhere in another Philanthrotech project.

US Xchange, a regional telephone company and Internet service provider based in Grand Rapids, sponsored the e-mail accounts for the program.

Every Tuesday and Thursday, the six residents of Heather Hills converged on an empty apartment in the retirement village where the computers were set up. For most, it was their first experience with a computer. Volunteers from the community were on hand to help. Every Monday and Wednesday, the students from the business applications and technology class at Union High School spent class time reading e-mail and replying.

Overcoming barriers

For 17-year-old Lindsay Myers, finding topics to write

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JANICE JOHNSON
Union High School
Principa l

about was difficult.

"I think too much about it," said Myers, who wrote of her interest in basketball and swimming, her love of traveling, her pet cat and the school bond issue that didn't pass last year.

"I've come to one conclusion that either people are really cheap, or they are just blind," she wrote.

Her partner at Heather Hills, Grace Nelson found the computer to be intimidating. The keyboard had more buttons than a typewriter, and they were more sensitive, she said.

Nelson was convinced her partner was a young boy. Her clue? Myers started some of the letters with "Hey."

"It's a boy word," Nelson had guessed. "A girl wouldn't use it

Sharing Insights

For 16-year-old Crystal Nowak, the project prompted her to watch the nightly news in search of topics to write about. She shared her thoughts on the Colorado shooting, the bombings in Kosovo, the tornado in Oklahoma and bomb scares in local schools.

She also wrote of her love of going fishing with her dad, about the three-story tree house she was building with her friends and about her dream cars: either a yellow Mustang convertible or yellow Corvette convertible.

Nowak, who didn't fall for stereotypes, had no idea of the gender of the person she was communicating with.

"The way I talk I could be a guy," she said. And she was right.

Her partner, Mary Tidwell did think she was a boy. To Tidwell, 78, the tree house, fishing and love of cars were boy things. She was impressed with Jerry's array of subjects and writing skills.

"He's got an imagination, I think he ought to be a writer," Tidwell said prior to meeting her e-mail buddy. Either that or a civil engineer who would design and build better roads for his dream cars.

A real meeting

The cyber-pals donned baseball caps with their e-mail aliases written upon them for a party Friday.

After their meeting, Bernard and Price talked non-stop, just as they had written non-stop. Both had been nicknamed "the novelist" for their long letters.

They discovered they had something in common: Something that Bassin had worried about when he discovered it early in the project. Bernard's dad, Stuart Bernard, was the director of maintenance at Heather Hills Retirement Village. But the elder Bernard, who figured out the scheme, was able to keep the secret from his son and from the retirees.

Union High School principal Janice Johnson said she was thankful for the opportunity for the students to get the hands-on education, but she was even more thankful for the intergenerational connection that was made.

"It's more than a lesson in technology. It's a lesson in humanism," said Johnson, who encouraged the senior citizens to keep in touch with the students.

"All our youth need someone special in their lives," Johnson said.

Bassin was also pleased by the friendships that were made.

"E-mail transcends all barriers. It really does open up people's worlds," he said.

Arnie Buist, the lifestyle enrichment coordinator for Heather Hills, said the project has convinced the staff that the retirement village needs a computer with Internet access. They plan on buying one in the near future for the residents to share.

Patti Wolterstorff, the assistant director at Heather Hills, said the project was a golden opportunity for the residents to learn about the Internet.

"It's been exciting, because they're so excited about it," she said.