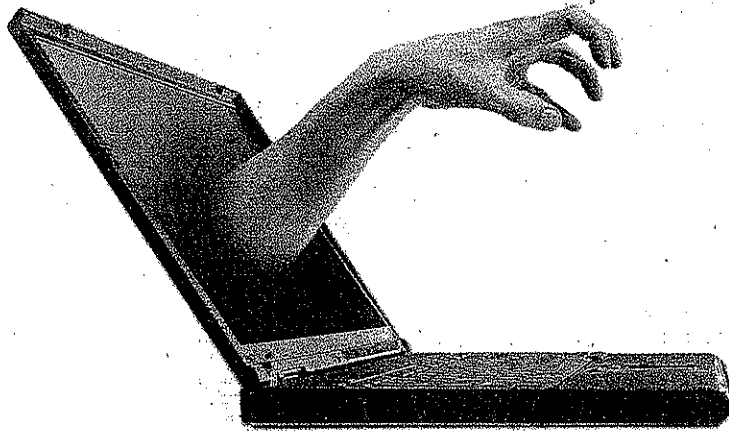


DANGER at your FINGERTIPS



Peer educators shock teens awake about threats and dangers in cyberspace

By Pat Sherman | TODAY'S LOCAL NEWS

When Charity Gooden enters a room to teach her peers about Internet threats, the Oceanside High senior is often met with yawns and eye-rolling — a typical response from teens who view cyberspace as their generation's domain.

"They're like, 'This is boring. I already know this,'" Gooden said.

However, once she and fellow volunteers in Vista Community Clinic's Teen Cyber Ed-

Social networking safety tips

- Make sure photos posted online have nondescript backgrounds.
- Ask permission from friends before posting their pictures online.
- Set your profile to private.
- Protect your password at all times; do not share it with friends.
- Do not use file-sharing software such as LimeWire. It can transmit viruses and allow people to gain access to your computer.
- Check your friends' Web pages to make sure they do not post personal information about you.
- Avoid letting friends use your computer.

Source: Vista Community Clinic Cyber Teen Educators

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ucators program offer specific examples of how teens have been lured into life-threatening or illegal situations via the Internet or cell phones, ears begin to perk up.

"A lot of times afterward you can hear kids walking out going, 'Oh my gosh, I need to go home and take that off (my Web page)," said Gooden, 18. She is one of about 20 high school students — mostly from Oceanside and Vista — who lead presentations alerting teens to the dangers of posting personal or questionable information online.

Oceanside resident Jon Moffat created the Teen Cyber Educators program two years ago with a grant from Alliance Healthcare Foundation. It is offered to students and parents through Vista Community Clinic.

"Our goal is not to scare kids off the Internet," Moffat said. "It's to have them use it in an effective way."

"The Internet is a great tool to communicate with their

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peers, but if used inappropriately it can damage not only their reputation but their family's reputation and lead to a lot of other issues."

Teens using file-sharing software such as LimeWire or Kazaa could unwittingly be making their family's personal information — Social Security and bank account numbers — available to identity thieves, Moffat said.

"If you have (the software) on your desktop, depending on how you set it up, it shares everything on your desktop with the world," he said.

Gooden said she was surprised to learn that there are predators who spend their entire day online seeking access to teens' personal information.

"There's all these simple changes you can make to make



Michael Lannen (left), a program leader for the Teen Cyber Educators, discusses the program with Jon Moffat, Lannen, a senior at Rancho Buena Vista High, recently helped Moffat lead a presentation in Fallbrook. Pat Sherman

yourself safer," she said.

For example, Gooden tells teens to make sure any pictures they post online do not show them in front of a sign or other indicators that would give away the location of their home, school or places they frequent.

Cyber educators reinforce the idea that a predator can be a classmate who uses another student's information for cyberbullying or to fan the flames of an abusive relationship.

Though some teens aren't familiar with the term "cyberbullying" in which cell phones or computer networking sites are used to harass others, once the term is defined, it resonates, Moffat said.

"Then they're like, 'I get it. That's happened to me,'" he said.

Teen educators also discuss gang-related activity in cyberspace and how identity via MySpace, Facebook or Twitter could lead to legal troubles, Moffat said.

"A lot of kids don't realize that they can be considered

less of the sender's intent, the explicit snapshots violate child pornography laws and the sender could be charged as an adult, Moffat said. The pictures also could be shared with others for malicious intent.

Cyber educator and Cal State San Marcos student Nestor Venegas has helped lead about 100 presentations since his senior year at Vista High. Venegas said girls are often coerced into sending nude photos to their boyfriends.

"I'll see girls nodding their head when I talk about (it)," Venegas said. "They (feel) that pressure to do it. We sort of give them the power to say, 'Hey, no. That's illegal. I could get in trouble.'"

"Instead of feeling guilty, or that they don't really love their boyfriend, it gives them tools to get out of the situation in a positive way."

Cyber educators receive between 25 and 30 hours of training before leading their first course. Teens are generally able to relate better with peers than adults, Moffat said.

They also are on the front lines of the evolving technology and can suggest additional information to be covered in presentations, he said.

The teen volunteers receive community service credits, which are required by many colleges for admittance.

Funds from the initial two-year grant from Alliance Healthcare Foundation will run out this summer. Moffat is seeking grants and donations to keep the program alive.

"The schools are really excited about having it, but the funding isn't there," he said. Pat Sherman (760) 752-5774; pat.sherman@tinews.net