

A new way to network

From health to finance, Albuquerque-based site for teens teaches life skills

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Teenagers are being showered with negative messages about violence, sex and drugs in the media. Taking into context how often teens use multimedia technologies, it's about time to start thinking about what is really being shown.

"The media almost seems to be another way to manipulate and bring someone down," said Ariel Parrella Aurell, 15, a student at Monte del Sol Charter School. "I dislike the media, and only use it for communication with my friends." Ariel admits to spending a hefty amount of free time on the Internet, but finds little online to entertain her.

A new Albuquerque-based website, iaam.com, hopes to make a change by providing an online, multimedia network for teens that will offer a positive, nurturing, educational and fun Web environment.

"When I talked to teens, they are looking for information," said **Malini Hoover**, founder and CEO of iaam.com. She created the site and social network, where the whole point is to provide helping information, more specifically in the areas of "valuable life skills in finance, career, health and lifestyle."

Hoover began work on the idea that became iaam.com in 2005. Later, in 2007, she established LELA Media (named after her twin daughters Lena and Lana), the producers of iaam.com (which stands for "I am a millionaire" in all aspects of life). Hoover and her group want more than ever to see a "media metamorphosis," as Hoover calls it, "where teens can spend their time." Hoover compared iaam.com to Nickelodeon, only with lessons in life and financial skills.

"When I heard of (this) new social network website, I was immediately interested, and decided to check it out," Ariel said about iaam.com. "It seems very mellow and carefree, unlike other similar sites I am a part of."

Hoover is an extremely passionate woman with a background in finance and hotel management. About 10 years ago the wheels began to turn.

"I thought that we should teach young adults (about) finance, and maybe I should go into schools and help out in poor areas," Hoover said. "The more I thought about it, I found it should not just be for people in poor areas, but teens in general."

When asked what makes iaam.com different from other websites such as Facebook.com and MySpace.com, Hoover explained that the social media part of the site is very individual and unique.

"Facebook is for people you already know," Hoover said. "This one is for meeting new people." This way, teens are introduced to other teens who are interested in the same hobbies (i.e. filmmaking, music composition, etc.). Hoover also put heavy emphasis on the safety issues a social media site encounters.

"It is a huge responsibility with respecting teens' information," Hoover said. "I want to create a real community ... A smaller community, but a genuine community."

The site is "very interactive," Hoover said — it allows you to log on, look for proper financial and career knowledge, submit a video, photo or create your own contest, rate or judge other videos and contests, read comics, news, jokes, see music videos, find new cool links and play games. Hoover also mentioned that she wants to eventually award iaam.com contest winners with scholarship money for college.

"I think that these are a good way to voice one's opinions and also have a fun time online with others," Ariel said about the site's activities.

Another unique thing about the site is the "iaam dollars," virtual currency that can be traded in for actual prizes. The prizes include computers and money for college.

The "iaam dollars" are earned by submitting and interacting with the site. Hoover created them to teach teens about "working hard and earning money," Hoover said. "Kids feel they should have things right away, but if you want to earn money you will have to do something for the dollars." Hoover feels that teens will enjoy getting "iaam dollars," then apply their successful strategy with the online money to real dollars. The idea is very against the instant gratification mindset of our time and age.

Right now the site is fairly new and needs to be explored by teenagers, Hoover said. She mentioned how important honest feedback about the site is. She'd like to hear from teens about what they want from this site and what they want to learn.

The site is free to anyone 13 and older, and is proof that "positive media is available, and should be used more because it benefits society," Hoover said. "Bad media really doesn't give us any information or make us better."

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