



Photograph by George Sakkestad

Watchful Eye: Online safely, Michael Latauro, 18, who graduated from Prospect High School last year, is interested in encryption, which means to convert plain text into code.

High school students 'surf' safely

Prospect High School Cyberangels' participants start pilot program

By Moryt Milo

More than 50 percent of children in the United States use the Internet, but this 21st century resource is considered a Pandora's box of questions and concerns when it comes to safety, leaving parents at a loss for answers.

On the East Coast, a group called Cyberangels--the largest online safety, education and help organization in the world--was created to address cybercrime and safety on the web. Last spring, its executive director, Parry Aftab, spoke at Prospect High School, in the Campbell Union High School District.

Knowing Aftab's background--an intellectual property and cyberlaw attorney, who specializes in privacy law online and consults for multinational businesses and governments--Prospect High School science teacher Pat Huddleston took her students to hear Aftab speak.

Huddleston found Aftab's message on Internet safety critical in today's educational environment, and she asked Aftab to speak with the high school parents that same evening. A discussion was held with parents about being safe online and how children and parents

can develop the skills necessary to be web savvy.

Aftab also talked about the nonprofit Cyberangels--a virtual cyberwatch neighborhood that promotes and educates people about Internet safety.

The organization, begun in the mid-1990s by Curtis Sliwa--founder of New York street and subway safety patrol Guardian Angels--has grown on the East Coast with branches in foreign countries.

After speaking with Aftab, Huddleston worked with a group of high school students to develop the first Cyberangels pilot program on the West Coast.

Aftab says, "I was impressed with the kids, and we took [the program] from there."

Cyberangels has two programs: a teen program for ages 13-17, Teenangels, and Cyberangel Kids, a program for children 12 and under. The children in each work group are taught important Internet safety rules, such as using genderless screen names, appropriate chatroom behavior and awareness about the dangers of disclosing personal information online. The teens pass this training on to their peers.

Teenangels also become involved in more sophisticated Internet elements. They learn about filtering software programs that block keywords, preventing children from entering fringe or pornographic websites. They learn about protection from identity theft. They design websites that offer expert online safety tips to peers, and they provide advice on the best technology and hardware available from a teenager's perspective. They also can assist law enforcement with tips and investigate cybercrimes.



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Net Watch: (From left) Prospect High School junior Julia, 16; graduate Michael Latauro, 18; seniors Natalie, 17, and Matt, 17; freshman Israel, 14; and senior Hoa, 18, are part of the West

Coast pilot program called Cyberangels. The program trains students in Internet safety. Because the Internet has become part of the average student's lifestyle, Huddleston says the Cyberangel program is a critical life skill for all children.

"I use the Internet a lot when I teach," Huddleston said. "It's very important that my students are safe and understand online safety issues."

The students are now working with Huddleston and NEC representative Jackie Briggs, who heads its Cyberangel program. NEC is a leading global Internet solution provider and an active sponsor and partner at Prospect High School. Together, the group is developing an outline of what they want to focus on. The Cyberangel program is very fluid in structure, letting participants choose if they want to focus on cybercrime, cyberstalkers or building websites that offer safety tips.

For some students it may include a specialty in encryption (converting plain text into code); for others it may be privacy protection, while others may want to develop a strong understanding of the basics, which include learning and teaching their peers chatroom behavior and proper Internet etiquette.

A 17-year-old Prospect High School student, who identified himself as Hoa for security reasons, says, "I wanted to protect children from the dangers of the Internet, and to teach them how to use the Internet safely so parents don't have to worry."

Safety is the program's primary focus, and it's constantly reinforced by bringing in speakers on the subject. Briggs is planning to invite the FBI to one of the group meetings. They will discuss cases that pertain to predators and cyberstalkers, Internet risks and cybercrimes.

It's a comprehensive program with the ultimate goal of launching the Teenangels programs in other South Bay high schools.

For Prospect High School senior Matt Witter, 17, Cyberangels makes a lot of sense. "I really want people to stay safe on the Internet, and I want to be able to alert society and kids to the dangers."

Huddleston says the importance of safety can never be overemphasized because "this generation will not get by without knowing the Internet." Being safe is a tool today's youth will need to learn, Huddleston says.

Being armed with the proper skills is also why Aftab wrote *The Parent's Guide to Protecting Your Children in Cyberspace*.

In the book Aftab says, "Trusting your children is irrelevant when it

comes to online safety, because the ones you really need to be able to trust are all the other people using the Internet."



Photograph by George Sakkestad

Online Safety: Prospect High School science teacher Pat Huddleston, who started the Cyberangels program, looks at websites with Prospect High School senior Matt Witter, 17.

This is what the Teenangels in the Cyberangels program will learn. The students will be taught to understand what Huddleston describes as "a faceless medium" and when to believe or not believe in what they see or read on the web.

There are many websites that appear safe and legitimate when you first enter them, but they can be masquerading as something else and be fringe groups, Huddleston says.

Another Prospect High School student, who identified himself as Israel, says his younger brother was researching a report on Martin Luther King Jr. and logged onto www.martinlutherking.com.

"Instead, my brother got caught up in a racist website," Israel says.

It's a common problem that students need to learn to deal with and learn how to decipher and decode the information, Huddleston says.

Prospect High School student "Julia," 16, also had some uncomfortable experiences in chat rooms and wants to help people avoid these problems.

"It disrupted my privacy," she says.

Huddleston and the students are excited about the program and want it to spread throughout the Bay Area.

"I became a teacher late in life because I wanted to do something really important," Huddleston says. "Providing this kind of information so kids can develop an important view of the world is what teaching is about."

The students think the program will give them a leg up on the

Internet, but as Prospect High School senior "Natalia," 17, says, "I'm on a teaching and training career pathway and I will be learning how to teach kids and keep them safe. It's what I want to do."