

Reprinted with consent
from the National Catholic
Register. For subscriptions.

NATIONAL CATHOLIC REGISTER

call 1-800-421-3230,
or visit us on the web at
NCREGISTER.COM

REPRINT

JANUARY 25-31, 2009

Volume 85, No.4

Teens' New Safe Place Online

Yoursphere Is Protected Online Social Networking

BY BARB ERNSTER
REGISTER CORRESPONDENT

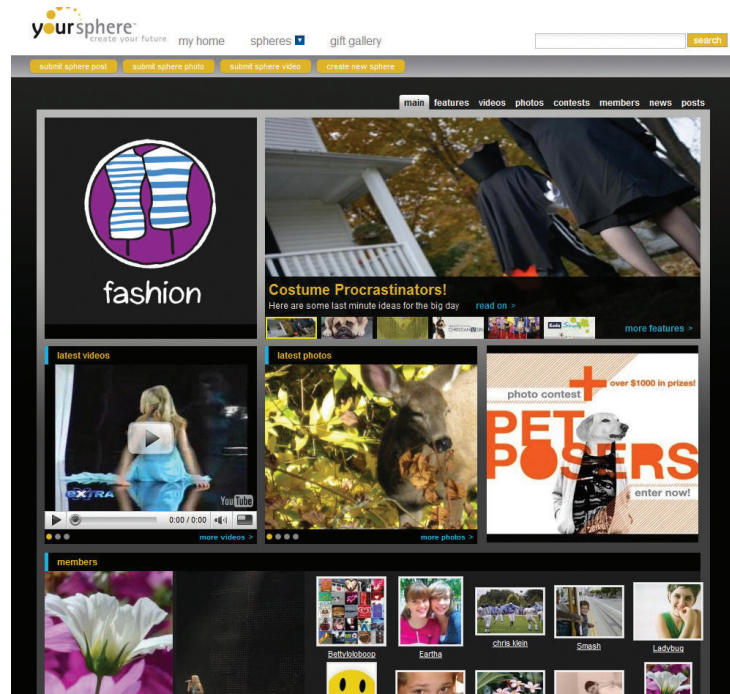
DAVIS, Calif. — Blocking online social networking sites from her household was like playing a “futile game of Whack-A-Mole,” says Davis, Calif., Catholic mother Mary Kay Hoal.

So she decided to embrace social networking in order to change it. Her mission? Raise the cultural bar.

After two years in development, Hoal launched Yoursphere.com in August, a social networking site exclusively for youth 9 to 18 that was inspired by her five children, especially teenage daughter Madison.

“I was concerned for her safety. Online, it’s like safety concerns for children have been thrown out the window,” said Hoal. “I told Madison, ‘If I wouldn’t open up the door to my house and let 29,000 registered sex offenders get to know you, why would we let it on the Internet?’ I knew that other parents must have the same concerns.”

Hoal’s research included her own experiences signed on to social networking sites as a “teenager.” What she saw saddened and angered her. “I found an extremely coarse culture where they focus on hyper-sexualization of kids. I saw nothing that was reflective of the children that I know, including my own — their talents, their inter-



MYSFACE? FACEBOOK? Yoursphere is one answer to parents concerned about online safety. Find more at NCRRegister.com by entering the search terms: online social networking.

ests, their aspirations — all the positives that exist in our kids.”

TeenSpot and MyYearbook, which directly target teens, are dominated by relationship-seeking content and negative cultural pressures that plague teenagers, such as wrist-cutting, suicide, body piercing, tattoos, and features like “rate me” and chat rooms called “flirt,” “single” and “gaylesbi.”

Hoal knew she had to use her gifts as a corporate media entre-

preneur to counter the influences of these and other sites that are attracting kids.

Yoursphere focuses on the positive gifts and talents of young people and ethical online citizenship. The site features social spheres where members can create and share their interests in music, fashion, gaming, sports, academics, art or writing. Best of all, they can interact in a world that is free of offensive content and ads and “creepers” — preda-

tors, sex offenders, pornographers, adults posing as teens and anyone hiding behind a fake profile.

“The kids get privacy and they don’t have to worry about someone proclaiming to be *Skater Dude 1991*, when it’s really *Skater Dude 1961*,” said Hoal.

The platform reflects how kids interact offline. “Friending” is limited by age group, in that a 12-year-old and 18-year-old cannot be friends unless the two are siblings.

Brian Barcaro, founder of 4marks.com, a social networking site for Catholics, acknowledges there are a lot of problems with younger teens interacting online with older teens and adults.

“You can add content, such as photos and videos, that is borderline appropriate for older teens or young adults, but not appropriate for 14-year-olds,” he said. “But because they’re friends, a lot of that content can get disseminated.”

‘Nothing Negative’

Yoursphere supports its tagline, “Create Your Future,” with financial resources for college scholarships, internships and mentorships, writing and other contests. A reward system lets kids earn credits for iPods, movie tickets or jewelry. Yoursphere also donates to youth charities

CONTINUES ON PAGE 2

selected by its members.

Safety being a priority, membership requires verification of the child's age by a parent or guardian. A monthly fee of \$4.95 (\$39.95 annual) pays for identity verification and sex offender screening of the parent/guardian. It also pays for the beefed-up safety technology.

Yoursphere adheres to the highest level of the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act and is the only youth-centered social networking site certified by Privacy Vaults Online, Inc., part of the Federal Trade Commission's Safe Harbor Program for safeguarding children's information online. Yoursphere also has a dedicated Safety Task Force on staff.

"Naysayers will say the sexual pervasion that happens to children is over-hyped," said Hoal. "What I saw on the other sites made me so angry, that these large companies weren't doing something to stop the onslaught of content and behavior targeted at kids. In defense of them, they didn't

launch an online community to make sure it was as safe as technically humanly possible and that all of the content focused around the positive interests, aspirations and talents of our children. Yoursphere was."

Madison Hoal, a sophomore at Davis High School, is excited to have a social networking hangout that doesn't worry her parents. "I really like it. It's totally different than any other site. There's nothing negative on it," she said. "I'm in the fashion and sports spheres, and I made my own sphere. That was totally cool, because I couldn't do that on MySpace."

Jill Berry of Woodbine, Md., said her 10- and 12-year-old girls started with social networking on Club Penguin and Webkins. When her oldest daughter's friends started popping up on Berry's Facebook page seeking to "friend" her, she knew her own kids would follow. Berry likes the fact that kids can only interact with their own age group on Yoursphere and that it verifies their ages.

"I tell people that it's not that every kid is going to get involved with some scary character online, it's that kids don't have that filter to know, 'this is not a person I should be talking to.' I have a feeling that kids are more about having as many friends as they can," she said.

The monthly fee doesn't concern Berry. She equates it to spending money on a video game or other entertainment. Hoal noted that nearly \$1.2 billion a year is spent on paid online content and other successful online communities charge a monthly fee. She believes people will pay for the value and extra benefits.

Fees aside, Yoursphere has a tough road to attract teens away from the dominant sites and the online culture that they've gotten used to. Hoal is optimistic that Yoursphere will spread — one teen at a time. "To get the word out, we need to educate parents," she said, "and together we can create a cultural shift."

Jacob Weiskopf, 12, who attends Meadowbrook private

school in Westin, Mass., likes the ease of being able to get to know other people his age on the site. "You can really connect with people because you know what their interests are when they're in the same sphere as you," he said. "I can find some cool things (in the spheres), and I have a lot of friends."

His mother, Anne, would not allow Jacob on other social networking sites but likes the safety features of Yoursphere and the spheres of interest that go beyond sports.

"My son's interests are much more in arts and design, so from a concept perspective, it was much more compelling," she said. "It's a nice thing what Mary Kay is doing, creating an environment where young adults can get to know one another, and I think it's admirable."

Barb Ernster is based in Minneapolis.