

Last summer, with help from Eastern Michigan's Office of Academic Service-Learning, a group of teens created Concepts of Life, a Web magazine that covers the varied range of teenage issues and interests from a perspective we rarely see — their own.

"It's written by teens, for teens," said senior video producer Richard Johnson III, a Huron High School student and part of Concepts of Life's five-member permanent staff. "My hope is, in the next 3-4 months, we'll get it out locally, regionally and, eventually, nationally. There aren't always positive stories about youth (in the mainstream media). They focus on our mistakes, not on the positives."

Concepts of Life grew out of The B.Side, a program run by the Academic Service-Learning office, which teaches entrepreneurship along with project-specific skills. The Web magazine project was the focus of last summer's six-week B. Side of A (Business Side of Art) course. In keeping with the B. Side's proven recipe, it gave 23 teens jobs and training on a project that also met a community need.



**MAKING A MAGAZINE: Students from The B.Side, a program run by EMU's Academic Service-Learning Office, work together on creating Concepts of Life, a Web magazine that focuses on issues teens face today. Twenty-three teens received entrepreneurial training on a project that met a community need.**

"We focus on entrepreneurship as a core and use it to impact youth and the community," said B.Side project director Jack Bidlack. "It's important for them to see that you don't just function in a bubble."

The site, which unveiled a new, improved design at the end of September, includes lighter stories about art, music and gaming, but doesn't shy away from difficult topics. It currently includes a story about what it takes to be a successful single parent, practical information about sexually transmitted diseases, and a piece focused on a young woman's quest to get off the streets and the agencies that helped her.

With grant support from local, state and national foundations, The B. Side serves motivated young people, ages 13-20, who have a drive to learn about entrepreneurship. The core B.Side class — a free, 10-week experience called B.Side Basics — focuses on developing a business plan and finding micro-loans or sources of funding. The B.Side also connects youth with business mentors and paid internships, and keeps B.Side Basics graduates connected through the Young Moguls Club. The most recent B.Side Basics course began Oct. 2.

The B.Side staff created the B.Side of A after realizing that a lot of B.Side enterprises were driven by some creative activity.

"We told them we're not going to do art for your mommy," said Bidlack. "It was important they understand that we were creating art that targets a market, art that will be sold. We told them we don't want you to be starving artists. We want you to do something you enjoy and get paid for it."

The young people in the summer program were referred to The B.Side by Michigan Works, which funded the 6-week course with a Workforce Investment Act grant.

Working on a web magazine gave participants a chance to learn concepts of journalism, marketing, web development, video production and editing through job shadowing and project-based learning — all while earning minimum wage. At every stage, they were held to professional attendance and behavior standards, and expected to produce quality work.

Jessica "Decky" Alexander and Brooke Dagnan, EMU faculty in communication, theater and media arts, helped with the video segment of the course. Alexander, who's also director for the Office of Academic Service-Learning, helped the youth walk through their story ideas and decide what they should be shooting. Dagnan, who teaches electronic media and film studies, was on hand for everything from storyboarding to developing interview questions to shooting video.

They not only learned skills, but also gained self-awareness - a better understanding of what they're good at, what they like to do, what they don't. They launched the Concepts of Life prototype site in August as a the capstone of the summer course.

"Quite a few of the youth commented that they liked that they actually got to see the beginning and the end of a project," Bidlack said. "It wasn't hypothetical. They got to walk through the whole thing, and it gave them a much better idea how to project plan. It helped them understand why we were doing things. They got to see the whole picture and that really helped them grasp it."

At the end of the six weeks, the teens had created something they didn't want to see fade away. So, The B.Side received approval to employ five youth as staff, supported by a federal block grant that will pay them \$7.40 an hour to work up to 10 hours a week through January 2011. All five applied and interviewed for their current positions on the magazine they helped create.

Once the redesign has launched, they'll start marketing the site, looking for local advertisers to help the magazine become a sustainable business — and looking for contributing writers who can speak to 15-25 year-olds.

"They still receive some form of weekly wage or stipend from Michigan Works, and it's their job to keep this magazine going," Bidlack said. "... We really see this as an avenue to not only reach youth in our community, but to inspire them in a positive way. You can get negative news anywhere. This was about creating something positive."

For more about the Concepts of Life web magazine, go to <http://www.conceptsoflife.com>.