

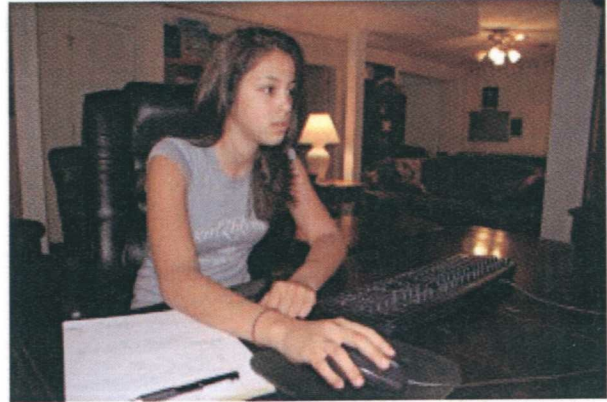
Rejected by magazine, local girl starts own Web site

By Angela Woodford
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When Mechanicsville resident Taylor Ramirez, 12, submitted a photo of her 9-year-old sister Allie to a national girls' magazine, the sisters received a disappointing letter. The editors stated that only professional child models were eligible to grace their magazine cover.

Taylor said she didn't understand why a magazine devoted to girls would refuse to publish pictures of "girls like us."



So she started working on a solution: her own magazine for girls ages 7 to 14 that published submitted pictures from girls everywhere.

Her parents, Tony and Tracy Ramirez, finally agreed to the idea and the family launched Taylor's online magazine, <http://www.girlzlikeme.com> on May 2. Girlzlikeme is currently averaging 60 first-time visitors a day.

"I had always hoped for and dreamed of being on the cover of a magazine, but had little chance of doing that," Taylor said. "This is nice because we wanted it to be a place where girls are special."

Tony explained that Taylor chose every aspect of the Web site's design, from the features to the colors and graphics. The family spends about two hours a day pulling in submitted photos and biographies from girls as far away as Japan.

For safety reasons, the submission form asks girls for nothing more than first names and states. By not even collecting or storing personal info, Tony said, there is nothing for hackers to obtain. He even uses photo-editing software to erase any personal info in photos, such as T-shirt messages that contain city names.

"We really want to stress safety, particularly from predators," explained Tony, who is executive pastor at Cool Spring Baptist Church. "This is very much a magazine where [outsiders] do not have control over the content."

The site features no chat rooms and no blogs to keep unsavory posts from showing up, he added. There are no racy ads and no questionable stock photos. He added that many parents have e-mailed to thank them for running a Web site that will always be safe and age-appropriate.

And parents also write to share how excited their girls are by "making the Internet" in features such as the site's "Girl of the Week" contest, he added.

"One parent wrote us when her daughter was picked as Girl of the Week. 'Can you hear the screams coming from our house?' The parent said her daughter thought of it as 'the same as being picked for Miss America,'" Tony said. Tony said that 65 percent of visitors have bookmarked the site as a favorite.

Another popular feature is the advice column, "Ask Allie," in which Allie and her mother Traci address questions statements such as "Boys are weird." Allie's response was, "Boys aren't weird, they are just different. The longer you can keep them as friends the more enjoyable and less confusing your life will be."

Launching and running girlzlikeme has not only enriched the lives of girls around the country, the Ramirez family says, it has brought them closer. They have an exciting topic to discuss over meals, and spend the after-dinner hours working on the site rather than going separate ways.

Tony screens all e-mails before passing them along to Taylor, who, as editor-in-chief, uploads the photos and biographies. Traci pitches in on the cookie recipes, and Allie eagerly stands by to see the finished product. The site is refreshed every Monday and Wednesday, and contains all archived pages.

Both Allie and Taylor are homeschooled, and Traci and Tony said this has been a great lesson on computer skills for the entire family, and subsequently on skills such as business management, communications and project planning. Tony himself knew nothing about building Web site before they launched girlzlikeme.

The Ramirez family is now focused on marketing the site with help from long-time family friend Stacy McCauley. They're giving out postcards at local events, and mailing them to dance, gymnastics and cheerleading studios all over the county with the short-term goal of snagging 10,000 new visitors per month.

"We want to get the word out to our demographic," Tony said. "The contacts have been 100 percent positive, especially when they see the site." Today, the Ramirez family added T-shirts for sale on the site.



Taylor (left), and Allie now have their own web site to run. Below, Tony helps Taylor monitor the site's content.

