

Online magazine celebrates girls Parents and their two daughters create safe site for ages 7 to 14

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Allie Ramirez submitted a photo of herself to American Girl magazine with hopes of one day gracing its cover.

But when the rejection letter arrived at her Mechanicsville home in February, not only did her hopes fade, but her self-esteem took a hit.

"They said they only use professional models," said Allie, 10. "I was very disappointed."

Her sister, 12-year-old Taylor, wasn't surprised. She had sent in her own photo a few years earlier and never received a reply. After Allie's experience, Taylor asked her parents, "Why can't there be a magazine out there for girls like me?"

Thanks to the Ramirez family, now there is. The sisters and their parents, Tony and Tracy, launched www.girlZlikeme.com in May. The interactive online magazine, for girls ages 7 to 14, features fashion, best friends, pets, a girl of the week, jokes, recipes and advice.

The idea is to give girls across the country and internationally the chance to appear in a national magazine. Already, hundreds have been featured wearing their favorite summer fashions. Tweens and teens also send in photos of their pets and friends, as well as their favorite vacation spots and community service projects. They write to Allie looking for advice on a variety of topics, including boys.

"I like it," said Liz Pearce, director of Commonwealth Parenting, a nonprofit group in Henrico County that offers parenting classes and workshops. "It's for girls, about girls and by girls. I like that the girls don't all look like models. We do a real disservice to girls in making them feel they have to be perfect."

Only first names and the state (or country) of residence are used. No registration is required, and the site does not feature a chat room or blog. If there is anything in a photo that can identify a child, like a school insignia, it gets cropped out or erased.

"We wanted to make it safe," Tony Ramirez said. "No one can post anything. It all goes through me."

The site is one Pearce will let her daughters visit.

"There are far too many of the negative Web sites out there," she said. "There are too many adult-oriented ones for my liking. Parents need to remember that. The Internet is here, and it's here to stay."

To encourage girls to participate, Allie and Taylor, as well as a few friends, have modeled for the fashion page. Their mother photographs them weekly in clothes borrowed from Kohls, Limited Too, Wet Seal and others. Their father edits photos submitted by readers and Taylor designs the online pages.

"Finally there's a place where we can become famous," wrote in one girl.

"I wonder if you could hear the screams from our house," wrote a parent when her daughter was selected girl of the month.

In April, the site received 1,600 hits. About 700 of those were unique visitors. The goal is for 10,000 unique visitors. The family is printing postcards to send to dance and gymnastic studios across the country.

"Some sites out there aimed at this age group are just too provocative," Tracy Ramirez said. "Someone sent us an e-mail with the comment, 'You guys are a bunch of nerds.' I said, 'We must be doing something right.' Here, girls can be girls. They don't have to grow up too fast."

And they don't have to be perfect.

"The regular magazines feature girls with straight teeth and slender bodies," Taylor said. "We don't do just that. We want everyone to feel good about themselves."

During a recent photo shoot, Allie and Taylor, along with friend Krista Phillips, changed outfits three times, posed in sun dresses in colorful gardens and laughed at themselves as their mother fixed their hair and directed them into the perfect pose.

"I need really big smiles," Tracy Ramirez shouted. "We are happy, happy, happy! Now, put your hand on your hip. Beautiful!"

When the shoot was finished, the girls wanted to keep the clothes. But back to the stores they went.

"Sometimes there's a shirt I really want to keep," Krista said. "But I know it has to go back. It's OK. I know next week we'll get to try on more fun clothes."

Like Allie and Taylor, Krista isn't allowed to surf the Internet at home. Her parents allow her to visit just a few Web sites, including girlZlikeme.

"There's no MySpace in our house," Tracy Ramirez said. "It's something you really have to be careful about. Our site is clean. A girl can look at it and say, 'Cool.' Parents get that feeling of peace knowing their children are not part of something sketchy."

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