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## Kidz Online Expands Scope

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The MTV generation can be difficult to reach out to. More easily engaged by video games than lengthy classroom lessons, these young adults are secretly crying out for a different teaching style. No one understands them better than themselves.

Kidz Online, a Herndon-based digital video production and distribution organization, began as an effort of "kids teaching kids." In fact, co-founder Wes Cruver was 11 years old when the concept behind the nonprofit was born.

Always fiddling with his family's computer, even before the World Wide Web existed, Cruver was bored with traditional school work and his grades reflected that boredom. He was more interested in technology and less fascinated with archaic teaching methods. But it was his mother who decided he needed to be more productive with his free time.

"My mom didn't want me to be a big nerd and stay in my room all the time," Cruver said.

Under maternal supervision, Cruver began using his skills on the computer to create a system for sharing homework help. What started as a philanthropic effort designed to help underprivileged students in an after school program has spawned a Web site boasting 22 million hits last month.

"It's been growing exponentially every month," said Joel Holland, Kidz Online's 20-year-old chief marketing officer.

In its early years the organization's staff met in the basement of a bank in Tyson's Corner after high school. The teenagers, mostly boys, attended Fairfax County schools, including McLean, Langley and Oakton. As they came of age for college, Kidz Online was facing some

  

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major changes.

Nortel Networks jumped in as a sponsor from 2001 to 2004, allowing the "kids" to change the company's concept from helping individual students to creating Web content and streaming video over the Internet. Kidz Online was also able to move its operations into a studio in Herndon's Center for Innovative Technology. Staff in Los Angeles is currently outfitting a larger space.

Holland said the core of Kidz Online is its free Tech Training videos, popular for both students and teachers in need of curriculum. The videos teach the basics of everything from 2-D animation, digital imaging, Web page creation and Microsoft PowerPoint.

From there, Kidz Online formed five content channels. Teach IT is comprised of easy-to-grasp tutorials on several IT topics. KTK Live!, an abbreviation for "kids teaching kids," is a sketch-comedy approach to teaching. Streaming Futures, created by Holland, are interviews with industry leaders designed to inspire career goals in teens. The gURL Tech channel profiles women in technology-based careers and the Technology in Action allows Kidz Online users to submit their own educational videos.

All the features on their Web site, [www.kidzonline.org](http://www.kidzonline.org), would overwhelm most nonprofit organizations. However, partnering with Nortel allowed Kidz Online to build its own in-house network with an eight gigabit per second, fiber-optic connection. This connection is about 8,000 times stronger than a typical home computer running on a cable modem with a connection of about one megabit per second.

Jeff Fissel, chief of Web cast operations, said Kidz Online is currently engaging in partnerships that will allow them to explore issues such as geospatial awareness and financial literacy.

The company recently received a grant from the NASD Investor Education Foundation to produce a "Mastering Money" series of Web casts aimed at teaching high school students and beyond how to manage money and begin investing in the stock market.

Made possible through a grant from the Department of Labor is a program called Geospatial-21, which includes interviews with people in the industry. One video highlights the technology used in operating the Air Force's "Predator," an unmanned aerial vehicle. Another Web show explores Fox's drama "24" and the geospatial technology included in the content of the television show.

Gino Guzzardo, Geospatial-21 manager, said awareness of geospatial technology is an important task and one that Kidz Online was able to convey to its audience in an effective manner. Exciting content was necessary when explaining such a complex subject.

"It's everywhere in your life," Guzzardo said. "There's Mapquest, video games and GIS in cars."

In finding industry representatives to interview, Guzzardo said he keeps the children in mind. "Our strength is in knowing our audience," he said. "All of our content is aware of the student because we know we have a smart audience."

Kidz Online is also expanding its content beyond the nonprofit arena. Cruver said they are beginning to create for-profit subsidiaries of the company in order to keep Kidz Online's services entirely free to its users. Projects such as filming educational documentaries or government conferences keep in line with Kidz Online's mission, while earning money to be funneled back into the company.

Future initiatives of Kidz Online are to go international, with studios established overseas. One much needed project is to bring technology into the mainstream across the Middle East. Educational tutorials are currently being translated into Arabic.

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