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Where to GO

Entertainment Drive
GO EDRIVE

Youth Drive! Forum
GO YDRIVE!

Club Kid

► **Welcome to Youth Drive! Forum, a cyber space where teens rule and pimples don't really matter.**

There aren't many places teens can call their own online. Sure, they're welcome in any forum; one of the benefits of communicating online is that age and other barriers to social interaction disappear. But, as in the offline world, teens *do* want places to hang out—to chat with others their own age with whom they can relate and share experiences.

Spun off from its own section in the Entertainment Drive (or EDRIVE) Forum, the Youth Drive! (or YDRIVE!) Forum is just that online hangout, a cyberspace mall/food court, where teens can discuss not only the fun stuff—all forms of entertainment—but also the social issues important to them.

Considered a forum designed by youth, for youth, YDRIVE! is staffed with young sysops ranging from 11 to 16 years old, including John Presley, 13, a keyboard player at his family's country-music theater in Branson, Missouri; Cameron Stark, 16, a junior at Judge Memorial High School in Salt Lake City, Utah; Evin Sayin, an eighth-grade student who logs on from Honolulu; and Adam White, 11, from Grand Rapids, Michigan, whose mom, Rilla Moulden, is one of the forum's adult sysops and was instrumental in creating the forum. The adults maintain a low profile, however, preferring to train the stu-

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dent staff to manage files, oversee the message board, and host conferences. "We guide the kids, we don't rule them," she says.

Moulden, whose professional background includes 13 years as a classroom teacher and experience as a developer of community programs for kids, wanted to create a youth-driven forum that blended education with entertainment. She sought the guidance of Entertainment Drive executive producer Michael Bolanos, who once collaborated with actor Ben Vereen on a teen version of a TV talk show. The two pooled ideas and polled the "experts" by conducting an online youth survey in EDRIVE.

"Kids were brought into the planning process from the beginning," says Bolanos. "We asked what they wanted. They said they're interested in the same things as adults, only in kid versions. They want to know more about movies, television shows, books, music, and concerts, and to read reviews written by other kids."

Forum members discuss those topics plus sports, computers, art and theater, and cartoons in the message sections; kid-composed movie and book reviews are available in the forum libraries, as are movie press releases and biographies and GIFs of music, TV, and movie personalities. The forum hosts special movie promotions, too. To celebrate the February release of *Mr. Payback*, billed as Hollywood's first interactive movie, YDRIVE! members had the chance to win passes to a prerelease screening of the film in a number of selected cities in the U.S. In addition to a weekly online teen conference, the forum hosts special guest conferences, such as one held recently with Chris Crosby, co-publisher of Super Crew Comics.

Library 8, "Refrigerator Door," lets kids show off their creativity, whether it's poems or stories they've written or graphics and sound files they've created. Fourteen-year-old aspiring novelist John L. Reid of Cassville, Maryland, uploaded three of his short stories to the library, seeking ways to improve them; Lawrenceville, New Jersey's Jenna Casper posted her story "Steven and Me" just to share her feelings about what it's like to have a crush on someone.

Photos of the YDRIVE! staff and forum members are the attraction in Library 18, "The Photo Gallery," where members are encouraged to upload photos of themselves or their families. Even members who don't have a scanner can be included by sending photos to Moulden, who will scan and upload them to the library.

But forum members say their favorite thing about YDRIVE! is just meeting other people via live "chats." "I mostly enjoy talking to people directly in conference," says Presley. "The idea that I could talk with someone on the other side of the world—it drives me nuts how great it is!" Moulden thinks the freedom of the online world is great for teenagers. "It's a great leveler. It gets rid of all the things that

keep people from communicating: age, appearance... there are no zits online."

Members drop in from all over the world, including Stefan Tryggvason, of Norwich, United Kingdom, who thinks live conferencing is "generally a good laugh," and Annie Sievers, who logged on "from the top of the world," in Barrow, Alaska, to search for a pen pal and to share her excitement at seeing the first sunrise after a long, dark winter.

The forum also tries to provide an atmosphere where teens can gain confidence. "We try to build self-esteem," says Presley. "We don't put people down or tell them outright that they're wrong about something. Instead, we try to help people." Bonding and trust, so important to teens offline, are also important here. Stark says he once joined a group chat and found something more serious going on. "A guy's life was falling apart," he recalls. "There were three or four other people there, and all of us were being so supportive and trying to help." Stark says he was amazed to see "people care so much about someone they had never met."

Even though entertainment topics are hot in the forum, other sections give teens the chance to talk about the things that happen to them in everyday life. Section 19, "Speak Out," has seen discussion on such wide-ranging subjects as individualism, school prayer, music censorship, racism, curfews, teen pregnancy, drugs, drinking, and smoking. Section 13, "Dear YDRIVE!," provides a place to ask advice on such issues as dating, homework, making friends, and summer jobs.

As the forum evolves, Moulden hopes to get more parents to participate. One goal she has for the forum, and for Section 17, "The Family Room," is to make it a place where parents can talk about family entertainment and leisure activities that families can do together. "The forum is for families and for kids of all ages," she says, while acknowledging that teens are currently the most active bunch in the forum. "I'd like to see parents discuss what their families do for recreation, whether it's vacation spots, family movies, camps—anything that families can do together for entertainment."

Moulden also invites parents to drop in to talk about the kinds of entertainment their kids consume and the issues surrounding entertainment, such as violence on TV and in video games, and ways to use TV effectively for education. She sees Section 17 as a place where parents can empower themselves to change children's entertainment. "Instead of boycotting or being disgusted with something like the Power Rangers yet not knowing what to do about it, parents can discuss these issues here and get the industry's attention," she says.

One industry professional who is listening is Lori Cook, children's-services director at television station WXMI FOX

17 in western Michigan and executive producer of a weekly teen show called *Fast Forward* that airs on two Fox TV affiliates in Michigan. She says YDRIVE! puts her in touch with her target market and removes traditional barriers to communication. "I hang out with the kids, talk with them, and listen to them," says Cook, who also writes a weekly children's column in *The Grand Rapids Press*. While preparing to launch a six-week Tobacco-Free Kids campaign with the American Lung Association, Cook checked out YDRIVE! to get advice on how to create public-service announcements that would get kids' attention. Her question "Why do kids smoke when they know it could harm them?" generated more than 20 insightful responses, and she used the feedback to create effective TV spots.

Cook's participation in YDRIVE! has resulted in a collaboration between Adam White's sixth-grade class and *The Grand Rapids Press*, Cook's station WXMI, and a group of movie theaters in western Michigan. Calling themselves the C.O.O.L. (CCommunicating On Line) Zone, the kids write a weekly column in *The Grand Rapids*

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Press, accompany Cook when she does interviews for *Fast Forward*, and attend prerelease screenings of G- and PG-rated movies. The C.O.O.L. critics write movie reviews, post them in the forum, and turn them in as schoolwork. Moulden says the partnership is a way to teach the kids communications skills such as how to write critically. Also, children's-book publishers such as Free Spirit Press, HyperionBooks for Children, and Disney Press will soon provide books that the C.O.O.L. Zone kids will review and post in the forum's libraries.

By communicating online, young people can develop skills that will prepare them for greater social interaction as they grow up, says Moulden. "[At this age] maybe they haven't quite learned how to sort out their thoughts. Once they do, they change from using the message board just as a way to meet other kids to a place to work out their ideas and philosophies of life. It's a progression of sophistication." ■

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