

A tech expert at 10

Mother and son team up to promote good digital citizenship

by Nancy Thompson
Editor

Marialice Curran and her son, Curran Dee, work together to help teachers and students use social media for the common good.

Like many 10-year-old boys, Curran Dee loves to play hockey, golf and video games. But unlike his peers, he's an internationally known speaker about kids and technology and is the "chief kid officer" of DigCitKids, where he helps parents and children develop necessary skills for the digital age.

He was one of the featured speakers at the Digital Citizenship Summit at Twitter headquarters in San Francisco in October, has presented his ideas at a TEDxYouth talk in Massachusetts, and spoke at a Digital Citizenship event in London earlier this year.

He works alongside his mother, Marialice B.F.X. Curran, an assistant professor at the University of Saint Joseph and the founder of the Digital Citizenship Institute and co-founder of the Digital Citizen Summit, both based in Glastonbury.

"Our mission at DigCitKids is to keep asking a wider audience, 'How are you using technology every day to make a difference for your community, for other kids and for the world?' and then showing them how to get started," she said. "My goal is to promote student voice and digital citizenship for kids, by kids."

She said most of the talk about children and the internet is about what to avoid, such as sexting, cyber-bulling and trolling. By contrast, the Digital Citizenship Institute and DigCitKids work to show children how to use social media to promote social good.

"Instead of the drama, we're focused on the good," she said.

For example, she said teachers at an elementary school in Houston used Curran's TED talk. When students in one of the fourth-grade classes wanted to ban plastic bags because of their threat to the environment they turned to social media. Lila Mankad, one of the students, created a petition on change.

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-Curran Dee

org that has been signed by nearly 1,700 concerned citizens.

In Newington, Jess Bedford is working with fourth-grade students to evaluate Internet sites and come up with activities they'd like to do using social media.

Bedford, a technology teacher for Newington Public Schools, met Marialice Curran when she was Bedford's professor at the University of Saint Joseph.

She praised Curran and his mother for their work. "Curran is an inspiration that shows kids have a voice and they want to be heard," she said. "He has inspired me to be a better teacher by thinking about how I can amplify student voice and solve real-world problems or questions they may have. DigCitKids allows for students to reflect on their choices and how

they can help the world even at a young age. Marialice's passion and enthusiastic personality has inspired many and the DigCitKid movement is extremely important in teaching students of all ages how to navigate the digital world as if it is the world face to face. Making that realization that there is a person on the other side of the screen and that words are powerful and are seen farther than just a few

people. Marialice attended one of my technology classes to spread the DigCit word. This opportunity sparked a conversation about cyberbullying, collaboration, and how one small act of standing up can cause a ripple effect to help stop cyber bullying."

Others, parents and professionals alike, agree.

Jennifer Fitzsimmons, a parent and elementary school teacher, met Marialice and Curran about a year ago at the first Digital Citizenship Summit at the University of Saint Joseph.

"That day ignited a passion for digital citizenship that was inspired by Marialice and her belief that kids like her son Curran were in dire need of guidance to use tech to be socially responsible citizens," she said. "I have been an elementary school teacher for over 20 years and I love to learn new ways to inspire students."

She said she has been impressed by Curran's courage and compassion. "He has the courage to be the voice of reason that so many kids wish they had. Many children live in fear and are unable to verbalize their true thoughts about technology, citizenship and the

typical school today. Curran is a boy that finds the silver lining in the tech cloud of today. He advocates for students in a compassionate, kind way and embraces the 'global' society mindset. He encourages educators and students to take risks by implementing technology into their classrooms so that students will want to stay in their classrooms long after the bell has rung. He advocates for the creative mindset and allowing students to lead the learning. He truly just wants kids to love school. He also models ways that students and classrooms can use technology and learning to make the world a better place. He is the digital change I wish to see in the world."

She said she believes that DigCitKids is "the hope that we as parents have for our 21st-century learners. It is the proactive, socially appropriate, responsible way that kids can use technology to send out a hopeful message to all kids about ways to be a good online citizen. DigCitKids highlights the incredible capabilities technology can have on our society when put towards helping and bettering the lives of others. Any age, gender, race, tech level is embraced and accepted."

Judy Arzt, an instructor at the University of Saint Joseph who teaches and lectures about educational technology, has invited Marialice and Curran to her classes.

"It is very powerful to have an elementary school student speak in front of a group of teachers and to teach them tech savvy skills," she said of Curran. "His presentations help teachers see how even their own students can assume leadership roles. As noted, we need not only more students to take leadership roles as Curran has, but we also need to see more parent-child partnerships surrounding digital media and the safe use of the Internet including social media. Many parents/guardians continue to lack knowledge of how their children use social media."

Arzt said she has been impressed by their energy,

enthusiasm, dedication and energy. "Curran's TEDTalk was a polished piece of expertise, both content-wise and delivery-wise," she said. "We need more kids like Curran with positivity and leadership to make this a better, more positive world for all of us. Both continue to pursue the goal of teaching kids and helping educators and parents understand the power of social media and how to use the resource at our fingertips for social good."

Matthew J. Ross, director of technology for Farmington Public Schools, has sought input from Marialice and Curran, who was scheduled to take part in a program there in November.

"We had an idea of the type of audience and topics we wanted to cover based on parent, student, and teacher surveys," he said. "We plan to hold three parent forums this year focused around the technology our students are using. What most impressed us about digcitkids is the emphasis on using the technology tools for a positive result. All too often, it is the negative aspects that receive the attention, and cause teachers, parents, and even kids to shy away from not only the technology, but the conversation about appropriate uses. The approach that Dr. Curran and her team bring to the topics of digital citizenship, social media, and technology use dovetails nicely with the vision of the Farmington graduate. We provide the tools and environment that allows our students to become responsible, collaborative, global citizens."

Along with his mother, Curran is encouraging children and adults to learn together and to use social media for the common good. "When kids are passionate about creating change, they need to learn with the world. That happens digitally," he said.

"I think even kids in elementary school should be able to have a voice and be able to make connections beyond the classroom walls." **GL**