They're not flipping burgers

KINGSTON HIGH TECH FIRM OFFERS TEENAGERS AN OPPORTUNITY TO DESIGN WEB PAGES

Mowing lawns, stocking shelves, flipping burgers - for generations these have been the mainstays of teenage employment. But, for a new generation of tech savvy kids, "working with technology" involves much more than manning a deep-fryer or ringing up frozen peas at the local supermarket.

Kingston-based Game Face Web Design (http://gamefacewebdesign.com/) utilizes the skills of teenage "whiz kids" to design, create and maintain websites at bargain prices. The company was started by Bram Moreinis, a former computer science teacher and expert in educational technology Game Face grew out of Moreinis' experience running "Tech Scouts" programs, which use technologically-gifted students to maintain and enhance the IT infrastructure at their own schools and his firm belief that teens can and should learn through "real world" experience.

"You need to create an authentic context for learning," said the bearded, bespectacled and intense former teacher. "That means people representing what they actually do in places where they actually work, not just canned knowledge out of a book."

Fed up with what he called the "limits of the public school system and the culture of the public school system," Moreinis left the public sector with the idea of creating a curriculum based on Tech Scouts for private schools. What he found instead was a lucrative business in web design. Using a network of young contractors, several of them Tech Scouts veterans, Moreinis (who also employs adults) set up shop in a single row of cubicles in an open, airy office space on the top floor of an office building in Uptown Kingston.

On a blisteringly hot August afternoon, three of Moreinis' teenage tech wizards sat at their desks working on projects. Ben Kudria, 19, began his computer science career as a freshman at Taconic Hills High School where Moreinis worked as a technology director and started a Tech Scouts program. Now a computer science student at Stony Brook.

University, Kudria maintains two servers that host files for Game Face clients and, using cost effective open source software, handles the nuts and bolts construction of sites designed by the company.

"It's interesting as a job and it's a lot more fun than washing dishes at a local restaurant or something like that," said Kudria. "Plus I'm getting paid something that's not minimum wage."

And, while the $15-$20 per hour Moreinis pays his young contractors is pretty good money compared to most jobs available to teens, Moreinis says his teenage workforce allows the company to offer services at about one-third the price of a full-service ad agency or webmaster.

"You don't have to pay somebody enough to afford a house here in the Hudson Valley or to feed their kids," he said.

But, Moreinis stresses, Game Face is more than a high tech / low wage operation. The company offers customers face-to-face contact and personal service to help develop and maintain websites tailor-made for their individual needs. To maintain close contact with clients and to offer more personalized service. than what's available through larger companies, Moreinis doesn't market the company beyond the Mid-Hudson region.

Each Game Face client gets his or her own teenage web guru to work with. The teens work face-to-face with clients to figure out how to translate their ideas and needs into a website that embodies what Moreinis calls "the six S's;" sexy design, "sticky" content, a search strategy, speedy access, smart navigation and "spot-on" direction.

In the cubicle next to Kudria, 15-year-old Brandon Paton is at work tweaking websites to make them appear more prominently in web searches. The Kingston High School sophomore explains the intricacies of "search engine optimization" and his constant effort to find new techniques.
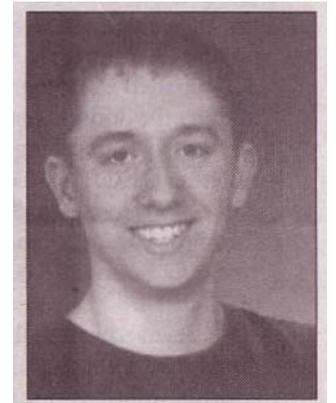
"Brandon is going to be a multi-millionaire by the time he's 25, if not sooner," said Moreinis. "I truly believe that."

For Paton, working for Game Face has meant more than a decent paycheck: as a "co-contractor" he works one-on-one with clients without supervision from Moreinis.

"Working here is a lot better than working in places where most people my age have jobs," said Paton. "You don't have client meetings at Burger King. I'm learning skills I'll need later on."

Brandon Paton

Moreinis sees Game Face as part of the effort to create a local economy based on entrepreneurial ventures and small businesses.

"I always thought that marketing and sales and advertising were evil," said Moreinis. "When I worked in the public sector I had that luxury. Now I see that a local economy is critical if we want to maintain the quality of life we want here in the Mid-Hudson Valley. And a local economy can only work if local businesses can compete with the corporations. You don't want Starbucks coming in; you don't want Wal-Mart."

These "Tech Scouts" work for Game Face Web Design in Kingston. They are (from left to right) Benjamin Kudria of Columbia County and Jordan DeNitto and Adam Atlas of Ulster County.