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## Teen tutors prove anything adults can do, they can do better

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by **Peggy Vaughn**

Staff Writer

Aug. 10, 2005

Company built on premise students learn best from peers

Like any successful entrepreneur, Erik Kimel knows that to build a business, you have to take a few calculated risks.

So after years of employing only high school students for his tutoring service, the 18-year-old CEO and founder of Peer2Peer Tutors is stepping out on a limb and hiring an adult.

"I felt it was time to have an adult talking with the clients calling us," said Kimel of Potomac. "Our clients are the parents, the people with the vested interest -- it's their money and their kids we're tutoring -- and I wanted an adult handling those calls."

So this summer he hired Ann Connelly of North Potomac to fill the newly established position of M.O.M., or Management Operational Mentor.

"A big part of my interest in taking the job is that I've used the program and I know it works," Connelly said of the company that tutored her two children, both students at Robert Frost Middle School.

Hiring more staff is not the only leap Kimel's one-year-old company is taking as it continues to grow and profit. To date, the company has



**Susan Whitney-Wilkerson /The Gazette**

**Erik Kimel (center), 18, of Potomac, holds a management staff meeting of the tutoring company he founded, Peer2Peer Tutors, at a Potomac coffee shop. Kimel now lives away at business school but is expanding the thriving company he opened while still a student at Winston Churchill High School. Pictured clockwise from the left are his sister Sara Kimel, 16, Adam Jaffe, 18, Kimel, Eric Fink, 16, Eric Stromberg, 17 and Jamie Grossman. 17.**

generated \$30,000 in gross revenues.

"It was profitable from day one," Kimel said. "But I want to double those revenues by the end of this school year."

Making money takes money, so this summer Kimel invested in a new Web site. It now accepts credit card payments and has a new "essay review" feature that allow clients to upload draft essays in English, French or Spanish.

"We'll review the essay for grammar, spelling, syntax and clarity of thought, but we won't rewrite it," Kimel said. "We'll also review college [application] essays. We've got [reviewers] at all the top schools and they know exactly what colleges are looking for in the essays."

And this school year, company tutors will appear on "Homework Hotline," the Montgomery County Public School television show where students call in homework questions and the show host helps find a solution.

"We'll appear on 30 shows, about once a week," he said. "It's really exciting to be endorsed by the county school system."

For a business owned and managed by youths, hiring Connelly was a big step. But Kimel is used to taking big steps.

In 2004, while a senior at Winston Churchill High School, he looked around at his fellow students in a Calculus class and figured he had the makings of his own company.

"I thought, these are bright, talented people," he said. "And I know kids learn better from other kids. When I wanted someone to proofread my papers, I didn't go to my mom or dad, I went to other students."

By the end of his senior year, Kimel's staff of some 30 tutors recruited from among the school's brightest students had racked up more than 400 hour-long tutoring sessions ranging from Chinese to Algebra. He advertised the business through PTA newsletters and word-of-mouth.

By the end of this past spring, the business had expanded to include nearly 40 tutors from Churchill, Thomas S. Wootton and Walt Whitman high schools. To date, the tutors have done more than 1,200 tutoring sessions at an average cost of \$35 an hour.

"Parents love us because we cost less than the going rate around here, which is anywhere from \$50 to \$125 an hour," Kimel said. "When we first started, [parents] tried to negotiate a lower price, but they don't any more. They know we deliver quality at a low price."

Kimel left home last fall to study at New York University's Stern School of Business, but he continues to oversee the growth of the business from his dorm room. He relies on a management team consisting of his sister Sarah, a rising senior at Winston Churchill, and two or three friends still in high school to manage much of the day-to-day running of the company.

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Sara, 16 and a rising senior, carefully screens the applications from students hoping to be tutors.

"We get more applicants than we can use," she said. "It's a dream job because [tutors] can earn so much more than working retail and the hours are flexible.

"We look at their GPA, but they have to be more than just an A+ student," she said. "They have to be able to communicate the material, to relate to the kids."

An advisory board comprised of his father, a college professor and a long-time family friend offers some adult guidance.

"They're very wise people who have been around the block," he said.

Connelly, who also works part-time for an educational nonprofit, will add to that. And she is taking a percentage of profits instead of a straight salary in her new position because she said she believes in its mission.

"I've used other tutoring companies, but this one is unique," she said. "The tutors have taken the classes themselves so they know the teachers and know the subject material. And being closer in age to the kids they tutor, they can build a special relationship."

That natural rapport between younger and older students, separated in age and experience by years and not decades, is what fuels his company's success, Kimel said.

"There's an excitement when middle school kid has a senior coming over to the house to tutor them," he said of his staff that now also includes tutors from Walter Johnson High School. "It's part of being a kid, to look up to high school students, to see them as a mentor. They feel tied down by adult tutors, they want to be with their peers."

For more information, call 240-793-9673 or go to [www.peer2peertutors.com](http://www.peer2peertutors.com).

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