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Magazine gives teens with views a place to express them

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You won't find the latest teen idol on the cover of this teen magazine. There's no article inside doling out advice on how to find a homeroom heartthrob or tips on looking cool for school. Instead, the magazine deals with such serious issues as peer pressure, body image, self-esteem, and racial discrimination.

Sound too weighty for teenagers? Think again. The magazine is written entirely by teens themselves – and perhaps because of that, it claims a readership in the millions.

Teen Ink is the creation of John and Stephanie Meyer of Newton. Founded 18 years ago in their basement, the magazine has no staff writers. Instead, it relies on submissions from teenagers. They haven't been hard to come by. Last year, the magazine, received 54,000 pieces of work, a quarter of which arrived through its website, Teenink.com.

Printed on newsprint, the magazine is a far cry from the slick teen magazines on newsstands. Articles cover subjects ranging from sports to community service to the environment. Other types of work are also welcome. The magazine publishes poetry, personal essays, drawings, photos, and reviews of music, books, movies and colleges.

The Meyers say they created *Teen Ink* because they believed teenagers had important things to say but few places

to express their views on issues that matter.

"Media is constantly trying to tell teenagers how to act, what to think, and what to wear," John said. "We thought it'd be important to have a magazine for teenagers where they control the agenda."

"It's not only empowering for the kids who write but empowering for the kids who read it and feel like, 'I'm not alone. I really am not going through this really scary period of teenagedom by myself,'" said Stephanie, who serves as the magazine's senior editor.

In a recent issue, a teen wrote about the anguish of living with a stutter: "Why must my stutter define me? Why must I feel like a fool in the simplest of social situations?" Another teen described her anorexia and bulimia and explained how a friend was helping her through the struggle: "Sitting between Misty and Sean, watching them shovel pizza and ice cream into their mouths, my stomach quivered. It had been months since I'd eaten anything like that. I could feel my mouth starting to water. Abruptly, I shoved my chair away from the table, knocking it over, and walked away, shocking my best friend Jeanie, who was the only one who knew my secret."

The emotional subjects that fill some of the magazine's 52 pages – love, loss, fitting in, getting along with families,

depression – are balanced with opinion and entertainment pieces. In this same issue, another teen gave her thoughts on juveniles and the death penalty. Another reviewed the band Travis. Two others critiqued the movies "13 Going on 30" and "Secret Window."

When the Meyers started the magazine, they were raising two teenagers and felt there were too few opportunities in many schools for students to express their views.

"We've always felt passionate about issues of young people," said John, a former publisher of insurance trade magazines. Stephanie was a social worker and a teacher. A magazine for teens was a natural fit for them.

"Back then, we got voting records from the towns along Route 128 and found families who had teenagers, and mailed a flyer that said we were going to start a magazine," John said. "If your children would like to send in an article, we would consider it for publication."

Within weeks, they received enough responses to publish the first issue, a 24-page magazine they called *The 21st Century*. They pieced it together the "old-fashioned paste-up way" and had it printed. They mailed it, free of charge, to hundreds of households in the area. The demand for the magazine rose, and the submissions kept coming.

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The Meyers quickly realized the magazine's potential – teens wanted to read voices that resonated with their own lives.

The Meyers set up a nonprofit organization, the Young Authors Foundation, to solicit donations and keep the magazine running. For several years they sent copies to families with teenagers, but eventually they found it too difficult to sustain the magazine that way. As teens grew older, it was too hard to keep track of who was still living at home and who had gone off to college.

Around the same time, teachers began to contact the Meyers for the magazine after students brought in copies. “Eventually, we switched the circulation from the kids who were a revolving door and established a steady base of English teachers and librarians,” John said. So they sold subscriptions to schools as well as families, and changed the magazine's name to *Teen Ink*.

What was born in the Meyers' basement has grown into a small publishing enterprise. Now they raise money to finance *Teen Ink* through advertisers, corporate sponsors, and gifts from companies such as Pepsi, the Disney Channel, Toyota, and Random House. They have more than 6,000 junior high and high school subscribers across the country.

Some teachers use the magazines as a teaching tool. “To have models from real kids makes a kid realize, ‘I can do that,’ and that's huge in encouraging them to take a risk and write about something important to them,” said Cathy Greenwood, an English teacher at a high school in Bedford, N.Y.

The magazine has also provided opportunities for teenagers, who've interviewed celebrities ranging from Hillary Rodham Clinton and Colin Powell to Maya Angelou and R. L. Stine.

Rosie Hilliard, a senior at Scituate High School, has sent several opinion articles to *Teen Ink* over the years. The Meyers noticed the color and clarity in Hilliard's writing and asked her to interview Ira Glass, host of National Public Radio's “This American Life,” for the magazine. So Hilliard and another teen, Blair Hurley of Newton, met with Glass after a speaking engagement in Boston.

“We were only supposed to interview him for 15 minutes,

because he was going out to dinner, but then it turned into 45 minutes and then an hour,” Hilliard said. “It was really, really neat. It was one of the most amazing things that's ever happened to me. ... I really want to major in English now, maybe journalism.”

For Hurley, the interview with Glass helped boost her confidence. “I'm a timid person by nature,” she said. “Since then, I've become a leader in my school, and I started a creative writing club.”

In 2000, John Meyer struck a deal with Health Communications Inc., the publisher of the “Chicken Soup for the Soul” series. The publishing house agreed to a *Teen Ink* series – an anthology of the best of teens' personal stories and creative work from the magazine's pages. So far, six have been published, with celebrity endorsements on the book jackets.

“The books immortalize the wonderful pieces by these kids,” Stephanie said.

Teen Ink receives hundreds of stories, articles, and poems a day from teenagers, and they're often asked what they look for when deciding what to publish. The editors look for writing that's original and conveys an image that's particularly telling or vivid. They make only slight editorial corrections.

“If a poem says, ‘I love you, and you are the sweetest person in the world,’ that's probably not going to get published,” Stephanie Meyer said.

The Meyers rarely meet any of the teenagers whose writing they publish, and know nothing about their academic achievements. “We don't know if they're the brightest kid in the class or the lowest-level student,” John said. “Every piece gets read with the same eye. The playing field is leveled on that basis.”

And while teens are *Teen Ink's* target audience, the magazine and books are also aimed at reaching a second group: parents.

“We think that not only are teens enriched, but we as adults are enormously enriched because of the talents and creativity young people have,” John said, “and if you give them a chance to express themselves and if you're willing to listen, we can learn a lot from them.” ■

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