

Courtesy photo



'Pleased to Tweet You'

National digital citizenship symposium to be held here

by Lynn Woike
Editor

A fortuitous tweet in April 2014, sent from an organization in California, connected two individuals in West Hartford, both passionate about digital citizenship and both active nationally on the issue. They met for coffee last December at Cafe Sofia to kick around some ideas; now they are finalizing details for a first-of-its-kind digital citizenship conference to be hosted by the University of Saint Joseph October 3.

David Ryan Polgar and Marialice Curran founded the Digital Citizenship Summit that will bring together educators, parents, organizational leaders, students and representatives of the tech industry to discuss the use of digital devices at the University of Saint Joseph October 3.

Digital citizenship, organizers explain, focuses on safe, savvy, secure and ethical behavior. It involves etiquette and responsibility. Under its umbrella are such topics as trolls, cyber bullying, digital wellness, copyrights, digital law, tech use balance, privacy, password protection and digital tattoos.

"The real focus is on the positive," said Dr. Marialice B.F.X. Curran, associate professor at USJ and co-founder of the event.

She was named one of the Top 10 Digital Citizenship bloggers to follow in 2014 by Common Sense Media. In 2011, she co-founded and continues to moderate the digital citizenship #digcit chat on Twitter and she also serves on the digital citizenship leadership team at the International Society for

Technology in Education.

A former middle school teacher and principal, and an advocate for young adolescents, Curran has presented her digital citizenship research to the International Bullying Prevention Association, the National Bullying Conference and others. Locally, she taught "Pleased to Tweet You: Are You a Socially Responsible Digital Citizen?" at USJ where this fall she will be teaching "#YouMatter: Embracing a Culture of Empathy and Kindness," along with digital citizenship courses at both the undergraduate and graduate level, and a digital literacy course, too.

Her co-founder in this project is Dr. David Ryan Polgar; often referred to as a tech ethicist, he has become a respected voice on the

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topic of digital citizenship (digcit). With a background as an attorney and a college professor, he examines the use of technology from an ethical, legal, emotional and sociological perspective. He's a frequent speaker – with two TEDx talks – and has been featured in The Boston Globe, Financial Times, Sydney Morning Herald, U.S. News & World Report, Forbes, HuffPost Live, Entrepreneur, The New York Times and more.

The summit, he said, is all about finding positive, practical solutions to the problems associated with the use of digital devices, and learning to use the technology to better the world.

Polgar contributes to the Family Online Safety Institute, iKeepSafe and The Good Men Project, along with appearing regularly on television to discuss issues such as cyber ethics and tech etiquette.

He is also the originator of the mental food plate, and the commu-

nications director at Copilot Networks, which is focused on improving how parents and educators approach children's tech use.

In his work, Polgar often partners with Dr. David Greenfield, an internationally recognized cyber psychologist who popularized the dopamine connection with the use of technology in his 1999 book "Virtual Addiction." Together these

“Digital citizenship, for whatever reason, has taken off in this area. West Hartford has become a hotbed of activity, and we now have the ability to impact the national and international conversation.”

–David Ryan Polgar

two West Hartford residents developed the Digital Distraction Test.

Greenfield – who is one of the symposium's presenters – is an assistant clinical professor of psychiatry at the University of Connecticut School of Medicine and the founder of The Center for Internet and

Technology Addiction, the first of its kind.

Local public schools, Polgar noted, have "CyberCompass, a West Hartford Internet Awareness Initiative," with information and resources to keep children safe.

West Hartford has already played an outsized role in influencing the national conversation on digital citizenship. It serves as the home

West Hartford has become a hotbed of activity, and we now have the ability to impact the national and international conversation. Establishing the Digital Citizenship Summit is a great way to showcase that the area is being a leading voice regarding our complicated relationship with technology.

"We're so revolutionary," Curran said.

"In February 2012, I hosted a town hall meeting on campus about digital citizenship. We had a live audience and we live streamed it. And that was the start of trying to bring a community approach onto our campus. And I feel that digital citizenship – #digcit on

Twitter – started right here in Connecticut."

More than a dozen speakers – experts from a variety of fields – will explore the good, the bad and the ugly about the pervasive use of technology in all aspects of life.

It features a panel discussion

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they hope to live-stream, followed by four one-hour breakout sessions, each with three topics from which to choose. USJ students will be tweeting from the event. Coffee, a light breakfast and lunch are included. The day ends with a networking reception.

Having generated interest nationwide, organizers are expecting a sellout. Among the more than 300 attendees will be some local school districts; Canton, Simsbury and West Hartford bought blocks of tickets for administrators, teachers, students and parents.

"We support this team approach, because it does, it takes a village. We need everybody at the table," Curran said.

As the two began to discuss the many aspects of digital citizenship, they recognized a glaring problem: various individuals and groups promoting the topic in different parts of the country rarely pooled their resources and ideas. There was a lack of solidarity and the message wasn't amplified. Great work was

being done, but it often stayed localized, unable to cross-pollinate.

They decided to do something about it – to bring together leaders in the field to discuss, network and develop bold concepts to improve how technology is used. They merged their two individual networks and released a few trial balloons.

"We already know that this is going to be a successful day because of the interest that's been generated. There are a lot of organizations that are trying to grapple with this issue."

–Marialice Curran

When they were able to announce that Dr. Mike Ribble from Kansas – known as the godfather of digital citizenship – was participating, they began to draw serious attention. People began to see this was shaping up to be a major event, and reached out to be involved. Other networks are linking up, building a growing community

of advocates around the globe, all with the intent of shaping the national conversation about digital citizenship and improving tech usage.

What makes the summit unique is that it is the only conference focused on tech use that brings together all of the stakeholders. Some conferences are focused on

parents, others on educators, and some with industry. The Digital Citizenship Summit brings together parents, educators, administrators, industry, students and organizational leaders. It is a recognition that everyone needs to be brought into the conversation, and express their own ideas and interests, the two said.

Tracy Mercier, a 2012 graduate of USJ and an adjunct professor there, will be one of the summit's presenters. She took one of Curran's classes and attended her town hall meeting.

"I am participating in the Digital Citizen Summit because it is imperative that pre-K-12 educators leverage the digital tools – including social media – that students are using. We need to use apps and social networks to engage and motivate students of all ages in their learning. ... Social networks are often thought of as recreational, or just for adolescents, adults and celebrities," but that is not so, she said. "Digital citizenship is truly no different than citizenship; it is just applying the concepts and skills in a digital realm."

A Responsive Classroom consultant and a former elementary school teacher, her session will give those who attend a clear purpose, a plan and ideas to begin integrating social media as a way to safely academically engage elementary students.

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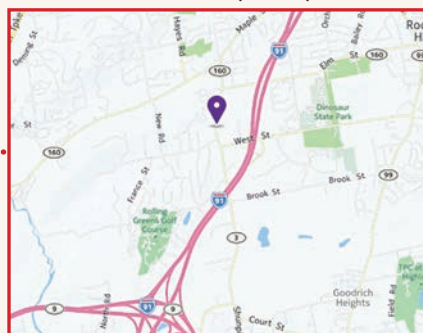
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Susan (Morrisette) Bearden – a 1987 Conard High graduate – will moderate the summit’s panel discussion. She is the director of information technology at an independent school in Florida.

“Digital citizenship is a passion of mine,” she said.

She collaborates with Curran on the weekly #digcit chat on Twitter and is writing a book on the topic for Corwin Press.

“There’s a tremendous need for digital citizenship education in this country – not just for students, but for adults as well. It’s been my experience that most people don’t know what they don’t know.”

She went on to say, “Kids often have great technical facility with social media tools, but that doesn’t mean they have the maturity or the judgment to use these tools wisely – and sadly, there is no shortage of poor adult role models for them to learn from. We need to educate parents, teachers and the entire community so they can help our children navigate these digital waters safely.”

It is that entire community that is gathering for the one-day summit.

“It is exciting to be able to have so many national and international experts come together in West Hartford to speak and share their research on digital citizenship,” said Jerri Lynn Hogg, PhD, a media psychologist and the current president of the American Psychological Association’s Society for Media Psychology and Technology.

The West Hartford resident said he’ll be attending “to collaborate and connect with experts in the field of media, technology, the Internet, and digital citizenship,” adding, “There are so many positive benefits from

our digital connections. ... The public in general leans towards looking at media and technology in a negative way.” Being a savvy consumer and digital citizen “can bolster the challenging areas that we face being digitally connected.”

Despite it being about digital use, the conference occurs in an analog setting.

“Digital is great, but at the same time, a lot can be said for the networking and the physical nature of being in the room. I’m telling all these people that the reason why I think a lot of these individuals are flying from all over the country ... is they’re going to meet all the movers and shakers in this space,” Polgar said.

“This is going to be a physical space for people to get to know one another, to collaborate. The digital citizen community, by and large, is very collaborative,” he said.

That collaboration can help devise practical solutions to cyber challenges – and then help implement them.

Instilling digital literacy is critical to helping people become wise users of powerful technology.

They are reaching out to local, state and national politicians because legislation is a growing area for digital citizenship. Some states are considering laws to combat areas such as cyber bullying and revenge porn, while issues such as the right to be forgotten and how footage from body cameras should be used in the courtroom are also being tackled.

“We know we’ve struck a chord,” Polgar said, noting that along with the negative are many positive aspects of the Internet.

“Social networks can connect people worldwide in an instant,” he said. “I don’t think that the average Joe or Jill has fully conceptualized that yet. We obviously know it, but we are still wrapping our brains around the implications of being intertwined with a worldwide audience. We’re getting emails from people in Australia, Canada, the U.K., who are saying, ‘How do we do our own digital citizenship summit?’ That’s what’s happening. Why is this happening? Because people can be connected in an instant through social networks, and able to not only communicate but also collaborate. The Internet has no boundaries, which is a major double-edged sword in life. The Digital Citizenship Summit is capitalizing on its inherent benefits.”

Curran added, “This is like the tip of the iceberg. ... We already know that this is going to be a successful day because of the interest that’s been generated. There are a lot of organizations that are trying to grapple with this issue.”

The summit will define their next step in this field, which now appears to be formally becoming an organization to serve as a hub, gathering best practices, top-quality videos, curriculum and other resources. Demand also seems to indicate the event can expand to be more than one day, and then replicated in cities around the globe.

Both also hope educators will realize that digital citizenship is a process and not an event – that holding a 40-minute assembly is not the way to teach students about digital citizenship; rather, it’s a 24/7 subject for all grades.

Curran wants to help students think and act on local, global and digital levels, simultaneously, and to use technology to break down walls and collaborate with people all around the world, helping to make it a better place.

Quoting Eldridge Cleaver, she said, “If you’re not part of the solution, you’re part of the problem.”

She talks of a “revolution of empathy and kindness,” explaining, “The way we are able to do it is with digital tools.” **WHL**

To learn more about the summit, visit digcitsummit.com.



Responsible digital citizenship focuses on safe, savvy, secure and ethical behavior when using digital devices. It is the subject of a summit hosted by the University of Saint Joseph that is drawing national attention.

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