MEMBER PROFILE

Marialice Curran empowers students to take positive action.

By Gail Marshall

An ambassador for student voice, Marialice B.F.X. Curran is the founder of the Digital Citizenship Institute and the Digital Citizenship Summit who has made it her mission to put students at the center of the global conversation about digital media.

Curran’s career began as a middle school teacher and principal. “I love it any time I have an opportunity to amplify student voice,” she says. “We learn so much more when we give students and our own children the opportunity to work side by side with us.”

She later became an associate professor in the School of Education at the University of Saint Joseph in West Hartford, Connecticut, and credits her students of all ages – as well as her son – with helping her see that creating positive change requires a positive perspective.

As a new mother, she saw the need to help students learn how to humanize the person next to them, around the world and across the screen. In fall 2011, while working as a college professor, she created the positive culture she wanted to be a part of, connecting college freshman in Connecticut with high school juniors in Birmingham, Alabama, to collaborate on the iCitizen project with the idea that “one person has the ability to make a difference.”

That one person, she says, becomes many and over time creates what so many have said can’t be done – empowered students who take positive action both on and offline.

Today, she and her 10-year-old son, Curran Dee, are doubly committed to teaching the power of positive social media.

After accompanying her on a string of talks about digital citizenship, her son surveyed the speakers and noticed that all of them were in high school or adults. “Why am I the youngest kid here?” he asked his mom. “Why does everybody wait until high school to talk to kids? Elementary kids have a lot to say, why aren’t they asking us?”

From a kid’s mouth to Mom’s ears. This is was just the beginning of DigCitKids, a digital citizenship program for kids by kids that the fourth grader started last year. The dynamic duo now travels around the world modeling the positive digital citizenship message. They speak about the need to practice empathy and a willingness to listen to and learn about others’ stories, to see and feel our shared humanity.

Curran’s energy and optimism comes largely because she had to fight back against a learning disability and early messages from others that she wasn’t cut out for success in school. She went
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on to prove the naysayers wrong and got a Ph.D. from Boston College. That taught her to focus on what people can do, rather than what they cannot do. Those who know her will say that her enthusiasm is contagious, and it’s part of what makes her a speaker and trainer in high demand near and far.

“Everybody has a story. Everyone has gifts and talents and it is our responsibility to bring those out. Take the time to understand, to learn with and create with your students. Ask yourself every day: How can we work together to use technology to help others through positive digital and in-person experiences?”

On a recent morning, her top-of-mind activities were global: She is teaming up with minor league baseball to do a Digital Citizenship Summit for the community. She is traveling to Nigeria in July with her son to speak. In September, there are Summits in Australia and Ireland, and in October, Kenya and Mexico. The annual national Digital Citizenship Summit with be in Utah, a two-day event with a student showcase.

Her goal is to connect people. “Everybody has a story, they just need an invitation to tell it,” she says. “We need you; we need your voice to be part of a movement to learn together how we can use tech for good.”

Her hope now is that people of all ages will join this conversation and movement to think and act differently.

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