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Patterson '92 Creates New Social Networking Platform

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BLOOMINGTON, Ill.—Janel (Wolfe) Patterson '92 of St. Louis has created a new social networking platform named Frienedy that she hopes will stop cyberbullying and promote positive digital citizenship, along with championing the Midwest as a tech hub.

Patterson created Frienedy as a private online environment after an unsettling personal experience. Patterson's oldest daughter, then age 11, downloaded Instagram to her new iPhone and attracted a follower who frightened her. Around the same time, Patterson's 7-year-old daughter was struggling as she shuttled between the homes of her newly divorced parents.

"I wish I could log on to your computer every night to chat with you or upload a picture, instead of only talking on the phone," the 7-year-old told Patterson one day. While too young for a cell phone, her daughter's desire to share private photos, messages and virtual hugs inspired Patterson to research other options.

What she found troubled her. Nearly 35 percent of youngsters ages 11-15 reported being bullied online, according to the Cyberbullying Research Center. Additionally, over half of children have used a social media account by the age of 10, according to a 2014 study from safety advisory site Knowthenet.org. So Patterson set out to create a platform that would allow parents, on their terms, to proactively introduce social media to kids. At the same time, the platform provides a place for people of all ages to manage content, share activities, photos, videos, documents and social feeds within groups they create.

Frienedy is all about group networking, Patterson said, but with individual control. When a person joins Frienedy knowing her neighbor is also using the site, the new user can't "friend" her neighbor. She can only create a group and invite the neighbor to join it. No one who is outside that group can see the pictures or posts. "There is no one-on-one communication by design," said Patterson.

Parents and children can manage all these groups – from a soccer team schedule to school notifications, photos and other classroom activities – through Frienedy. It's engineered to be compliant with the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA), a federal law designed to protect the privacy of children under the age of 13.

Frienedy is free to use, and the company does not accept advertising. The company monetizes via its WishList function, a feature similar to online wedding or baby shower registries. Kids add items to their WishList and when a parent buys an item from it, affiliate companies pay Frienedy a commission based on the cost of the item. Teachers use WishLists for the classroom supplies they need; sports teams can use WishLists for baseball gloves, shoes or any other gear they need.

Patterson admits Frienedy will never be the "next hot thing" by directly appealing to the 10-year-old begging for Instagram for his new phone. "We're targeting involved parents of younger kids who have just gotten their first device – a phone or iPod Touch – and aren't yet on social media," said Patterson.

Blogger Anne Livingston touted a Frienedy parent as a child's "digital coach." On her blog Kids Privacy, Livingston spoke of the importance of the cyberbullying conversation and wrote "...parents can keep the digital talk going by teaching kids what to post and what not to post. If a kid makes a mistake or posts a comment that is misinterpreted, parents can immediately step in and work with their child to remedy the situation."

Such "digital coaches" set their kids up on Frienedy because it's private and COPPA compliant, according to Patterson. "Kids find they can interact with friends and in groups safely. Plus, kids get pulled in because their soccer team or dance



Janel Patterson '92 with Arin Calamari '15, whom she hired through the recommendation of a professor.



studio is using it, their classroom is using it, and then they discover the WishList, which they love,” she added.

The company name was also inspired from Patterson’s youngest daughter, who was given the nickname “Kennedy My Frienedy” by a neighbor. The fusion of “friend” and “family” fit perfectly with the company’s mission.

Part of Patterson’s marketing strategy was to hire a business development manager who could work directly with schools, civic organizations, sports teams and others to present the Frienedy story. For this important position, Patterson reached out to her former marketing instructor, Associate Professor of Business Administration Fred Hoyt, for help.

As an IWU student from Rochester, Illinois, Patterson said Hoyt was one of the most influential professors she had, but things didn’t go smoothly from the start. “I was used to clear direction from teachers: ‘do A, then B, then C’ as the means whereby I earned an ‘A’ in the class,” she recalled, and Hoyt’s teaching style didn’t mesh well with the self-described “rule follower.”

“That entire semester was frustrating because I constantly felt like I was in danger of not getting that ‘A,’ which was so sacred to me. But at the same time, it opened my mind to the possibility of what I could learn if I failed in not getting that top grade.”

Another pivotal moment in Hoyt’s class came when he announced one day that approximately 50 percent of the students would wind up in a sales career. “He had us look around and kind of mark off half of the class, and I remember thinking, ‘that’s so cheesy, I am *never* going to sell anything.’ Of course, that’s exactly what I did for the first 20 years of my career.”

Even as national sales manager job for Lexmark and her success at other positions, Patterson said “there was always a niggling in the back of my mind that I wanted my own thing,” she said. The encounters with her daughters were the final push she needed to develop Frienedy.

It was an arduous road, as Patterson described Frienedy as “sort of a beast from a software development perspective.” Multiple developers took three and half years to engineer each feature within the site from the ground up, from workflow processes and interactive variables within each widget, to the integration of the software needed to create compliance with COPPA. Frienedy launched in April after two years of beta testing and funding from investors.

Response has been extremely positive, Patterson said, so much so she needed additional “feet on the street.” Hoyt passed on the business development manager job opportunity to several Titans, and Patterson hired Arin Calamari ’15 in June.

“She’s everything I expected an Illinois Wesleyan graduate would be,” Patterson said of Calamari. “Arin is the person we need who can connect with all audiences, from the superintendent of a school to a small parent group to a sorority.”

Calamari is based in Bloomington, and that’s by design. In fact, most everything about the company – from the investment group to the core values – are solidly Midwestern. “We’re trying to grow this from the middle of the country and expand outward. Social media has always originated on the coasts, and I want this to be something awesome that comes out of the Midwest.”