

Students tap into news show with celebrity kids as hosts

By Andrew Shaw, Staff Writer

Al Primo became a television innovator by creating the Eyewitness News format in the 1960s. But the hard news of war and crime is designed to appeal to adult audiences, not children, the Old Greenwich resident said. All he saw kids watching on television was "connected with sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll." Primo decided the only way to make news for teens is to use teens to deliver the news. "When kids see other kids doing things on TV, it has a positive effect," he said. His creation, "Teen/Kids News," has been broadcast across the nation on more than 200 stations. But the show's latest move takes a much bigger step toward fulfilling Primo's goal of teens getting news from teens. Beginning this school year, "Teen/Kids News" has moved from the living room to the classroom. It is nationally distributed to public broadcasting stations that can potentially reach about 5,000 schools. Primo describes the mass distribution, done through the nonprofit National Educational Telecommunications Association, as public service outreach, although the show does receive some money from licensing. For the school setting, the program, normally fit into a 30-minute period with paid commercials, is stripped of all ads. "The schools love it. It's getting to be a very powerful force in educational programming," Primo said. Schools in Greenwich are not yet receiving the program. There's a need for "Teen/Kids News" in schools, Primo said. "Current events aren't taught. This is a chance for teachers and students to know a little bit about what's going on in the world." "Teen/Kids News" fits a niche schools were looking to fill, according to an official at Columbia, S.C.-based NETA, which contacts public broadcasting stations around the country to offer educational programming. "It meets a need. It's fast-paced," said Michelle Flamos, NETA member services manager. "It's students talking that are in the same age frame as who it is targeted to." When Primo came up with the idea for a teen-centered news show. When Weiss and Primo began assembling the talent for "Teen/Kids News," focusing on an audience in their early teen years, the producers initially looked for child actors. Weiss said only a few managed to translate their acting skills into a natural on-air persona. The producers discovered most of the teens who came off well on air had one major trait in common: high-profile parents. Cody Gifford, son of Greenwich's Kathie Lee and Frank Gifford, worked on the show until about two years ago, Primo said. Business tycoon Ron Perelman and television personality Claudia Cohen's daughter, Samantha, is on the show. Other television personalities with children working on the show include CNN's Paula Zahn, with her



Haley Zahn, Gabe Viera, Samantha Perleman and Jenna Scotto on the set of "Teens Kids News"

daughter, Haley, WNYW-TV news anchor Rosanna Scotto, with her daughter, Jenna, and NBC's Meredith Viera, with her son, Gabriel. And Weiss' daughters, Lauren, now 15, and Nicole, 13, are on the air. "There's a high correlation of parents in news business and sons and daughters being able to do the news," said Weiss, co-executive producer of the show. "It became a preferred way to go." Nicole, an eighth-grader, said news shows featuring adults don't work for younger viewers, she says. "Teens don't find the actual news interesting. It's a bunch of old guys using words that we can't always understand. ("Teen/Kids News") is more appealing," said Nicole, who is in her fourth year of working on the show as a reporter. Nicole said it's been enjoyable interviewing celebrities — her favorites were the cast members from the Harry Potter movie series. "I couldn't stop smiling," during the interview, Nicole recalled. Adults do the behind-the-scenes work on "Teen/Kids News," which receives its educational content from the children's news magazine Weekly Reader. The teens, who are paid to work on the program, will be delivering news to a slightly older audience in the near future if Primo fulfills his next goal. "We want to attack the community college level," he said. The show also has a new nonprofit Education Television Fund, which provides educational materials around the world to schools in need. "Teen/Kids News," which is recorded in New York City, is broadcast commercially in this area at 11 a.m. Sundays on WNYW Channel 5 in New York and noon Saturdays on WTNH Channel 8 in Hartford-New Haven, as well as on several independent stations.