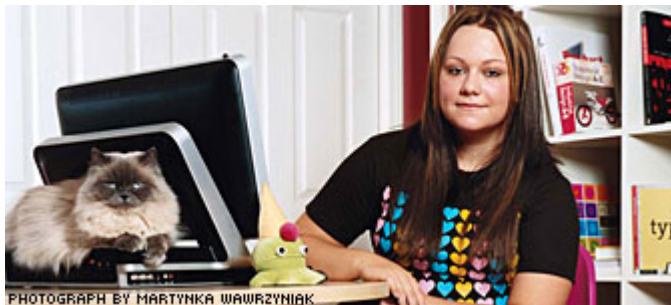


## Girl Power

**No rich relatives? No professional mentors? No problem. Ashley Qualls, 17, has built a million-dollar web site. She's LOL all the way to the bank.**

Late last year, Ian Moray stumbled across a cotton-candy-pink Web site called Whateverlife.com. As manager of media development at the online marketing company ValueClick Media (NASDAQ:VCLK), he was searching for under-the-radar destinations for notoriously fickle teenagers. Beyond MySpace and Facebook, countless sites come and go in the teen universe, like soon forgotten pop songs. But Whateverlife stood out. It was more authentic somehow. It featured a steady supply of designs for MySpace pages and attracted a few hundred-thousand girls a day. "Clever design, a growing base--that's a no-brainer for us," Moray says.



From her basement office, Ashley Qualls has made Whateverlife.com a destination for millions of teenage girls.



This summer, Ashley's pals--from left, Shayna Bone, Bre Newby, and Jen Carey--will also be her employees.

He approached Ashley Qualls, Whateverlife's founder, about incorporating ads from ValueClick's 450 or so clients and sharing the revenue. At first, she declined. Then a few weeks later she changed her

mind. He was in Los Angeles and she was in Detroit, so they arranged everything by phone and email. They still have yet to meet in person.

When did Moray, who's 40, learn that his new business partner was 17 years old?

Pause.

"When our director of marketing told me why *Fast Company* was calling," says Moray, now ValueClick's director of media development. "I assumed she was a seasoned Internet professional. She knows so much about what her site does, more than people three times her age."

It's like that famous *New Yorker* cartoon. A dog typing away at a computer tells his canine buddy, "On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog."

At 17 going on 37 (at least), Ashley is very much an Internet professional. In the less than two years since Whateverlife took off, she has dropped out of high school, bought a house, helped launch artists such as Lily Allen, and rejected offers to buy her young company. Although Ashley was flattered to be offered \$1.5 million and a car of her choice--as long as the price tag wasn't more than \$100,000--she responded, in effect, Whatever. :) "I don't even have my license yet," she says.

Ashley is evidence of the meritocracy on the Internet that allows even companies run by neophyte entrepreneurs to compete, regardless of funding, location, size, or experience--and she's a reminder that ingenuity is ageless. She has taken in more than \$1 million, thanks to a now-familiar Web-friendly business model. Her MySpace page layouts are available for the bargain price of...nothing. They're free for the taking. Her only significant source of revenue so far is advertising.

According to Google Analytics, Whateverlife attracts more than 7 million individuals and 60 million page views a month. That's a larger audience than the circulations of *Seventeen*, *Teen Vogue*, and *CosmoGirl!* magazines combined. Although Web-site rankings vary with the methodology, Quantcast, a popular source among advertisers, ranked Whateverlife.com a staggering No. 349 in mid-July out of more than 20 million sites. Among the sites in its rearview mirror: Britannica.com, AmericanIdol.com, FDA .gov, and CBS.com.

And one more, which Ashley can't quite believe herself: "I'm ahead of Oprah!" (Oprah.com: No. 469.) Sure, Ashley is a long way from having Oprah's clout, but she is establishing a platform of her own. "I have this audience of so many people, I can say anything I want to," she says. "I can say, 'Check out this movie or this artist.' It's, like, a rush. I never thought I'd be an influencer." (Attention pollsters: 1,500 girls have added the Join Team Hillary '08 desktop button to their MySpace pages since Ashley offered it in March.)

She has come along with the right idea at the right time. Eager to customize their MySpace profiles, girls cut and paste the HTML code for Whateverlife layouts featuring hearts, flowers, celebrities, and so on onto their personal page and--presto--a new look. Think of it as MySpace clothes; some kids change their layouts nearly as frequently. "It's all about giving girls what they want," Ashley says.

These days, she and her young company are experiencing growing pains. She's learning how to be the boss--of her mother, her friends, developers-for-hire in India. And Whateverlife, one of the first sites offering MySpace layouts specifically for girls, needs to mature as well. "MySpace layouts" was among the top 30 search terms on Google (NASDAQ:GOOG) in June. Ashley knows that she needs new content--not just more layouts, but more features, to distinguish Whateverlife from the thousands of sites in the expanding MySpace ecosystem. Earlier this year, she created an online magazine. Cell-phone wallpaper, a new source of revenue at 99 cents to \$1.99 a download, is in the works.

Running a growing company without an MBA, not to mention a high-school diploma, is hard enough, but Ashley confronts another extraordinary complication. Business associates may forget that she is 17, but Detroit's Wayne County Probate Court has not. She's a minor with considerable assets--"business affairs that may be jeopardized," the law reads--that need protection in light of the rift her sudden success has caused in an already fractious family. In January, a probate judge ruled that neither Ashley nor her parents could adequately manage her finances. Until she turns 18, next June, a court-appointed conservator is controlling Whateverlife's assets; Ashley must request funds for any expense outside the agreed-upon monthly budget.

The arrangement, she says, affects her ability to react in a volatile industry. "It's not like I'm selling lemonade," she says. Besides, it's her company. If she wants to contract developers or employ her mother, Ashley says, why shouldn't she be able to do it without the conservator's approval?

So the teenager has hired a lawyer. She wants to emancipate herself and be declared an adult. Now. At 17. Why not just sit tight until June? The girl trying to grow up fast can't wait that long.

Ashley is different from the recent crop of high-profile teen entrepreneurs. True, her eighth-grade class did vote her "most likely to succeed," but it's safe to say they were predicting 20 or 30 years out, not three years removed from middle school. She created her company almost by accident and without the resources that typically give young novices a leg up. Catherine Cook, 17, started myYearbook.com by teaming up with her older brother, a Harvard grad and Internet entrepreneur. Ben Casnocha, the 19-year-old founder of software company Comcate and author of the new memoir *My Start-Up Life*, is the son of a San Francisco lawyer and has tapped Silicon Valley brains and bank accounts.

But Ashley had no connections. No business professionals in the family. No rich aunt or uncle. In the working-class community of downriver Detroit, south of downtown and the sprawling Ford plant in Dearborn, Michigan, she bounced back and forth between her divorced parents, neither of whom attended college. Her father is a machinist, her mother, until recently, a retail data collector for ACNielsen. "My mom still doesn't understand how I do it," Ashley says. To be fair, she did go to her mother for the initial investment: \$8 to register the domain name. Ashley still hasn't spent a dime on advertising.

It all started as a hobby. She began dabbling in Web-site design eight years ago, when she was 9, hogging the family's Gateway computer in the kitchen all day. When she wasn't playing games, she

was teaching herself the basics of Web design. To which her mother, Linda LaBrecque, responded, "Get off that computer. *Now!*" For Ashley's 12th birthday, her mother splurged on an above-ground swimming pool--"just so she'd go outside," LaBrecque says.

Whateverlife just sort of happened, another accidental Web business. Originally, Ashley created the site in late 2004 when she was 14 as a way to show off her design work. "I was the dorky girl who was into HTML," she says. It attracted zero interest beyond her circle of friends until she figured out how to customize MySpace pages. So many classmates asked her to design theirs that she began posting layouts on her site daily, several at first, then dozens.

By 2005, her traffic had exploded; she needed her own dedicated server. Ashley, who had bartered site designs for free Web hosting, couldn't afford the monthly rental, not on her babysitting income. Her Web host suggested Google AdSense, a service that supplies ads to a site and shares the revenue. The greater the traffic, the more money she'd earn.

"She would look up how much she had made," says Jen Carey, 17, one of her closest friends. "It was \$50. She thought that was the coolest."

I'm doing what everyone says they want to do, "live like there's no tomorrow." --*Ashley in her blog, "The Daily Life of a Simple Kind of Gal," July 1, 2006; 2:43 a.m.*

The first check, her first paycheck of any kind, was even cooler: \$2,790.

"It was more than I made in a month," her mother says.

"It made me want to do even more designs," Ashley says. But first, she went on a shopping spree at a nearby mall with Bre Newby, her best friend since third grade. Ashley walked out with eight pairs of jeans from J.C. Penney and an armful of other clothes. Without a credit card or a bank account, the 15-year-old paid \$600 in cash--the most she'd ever spent.

"Before, I would ask my mom, 'Can I have \$10?' and she'd say, 'No, you have to wait a few weeks,'" Ashley recalls.

She hasn't asked since.

In January 2006, a few months after that first payday and six months before her 16th birthday, she withdrew from school. Instead of taking AP English, French, and algebra II, instead of being a straight-A sophomore at Lincoln Park High School, Ashley stayed home to nurture her budding business and take classes through an online high school. "Everybody was shocked," she says. "They asked, 'Are you sure you know what you're doing?' But I had this crazy opportunity to do something different."

That "something different" was Whateverlife. The name came to Ashley in a moment of frustration. After losing a video game to Bre, she dropped the controller and blurted out, "Whatever, life." She liked it instantly. She thought it would be a great name for a Web site, for "whatever life you lead."

Now her life is centered around working in the basement of the two-story, four-bedroom house that she bought last September for \$250,000. It's located in a fenced-off subdivision in the community of Southgate, a couple of blocks removed from Dix Highway, a thoroughfare dotted with body shops and convenience stores. She lives with her mother; her 8-year-old sister, Shelby; three cats; two turtles; a rottweiler; a hamster; and a fish.

Ashley's home office is the physical embodiment of her Web site. The business brings in as much as \$70,000 a month, but there's not a whiff of corporate convention. It's fun, whimsical, and unabashedly pink. Pink walls. Pink rug. Pink chairs, pillows, and lamp. Even the blue, green, and silver stick-on robots dancing on the wall have tiny pink hearts. It's a teenager's version of the workplace, which earned raves when she posted pictures on MySpace:

"SOO FLIPPING CUTE!"

"OMG I want that office."

"Geez. That's just incredible. I'm what ...almost ten years your senior and I am inspired by you."

The space reflects Ashley's personality, like everything else about her business. Therein lies one of the main reasons for Whateverlife's success, says Robb Lippitt, whom Ashley considers the only good thing to come out of her legal issues. When her lawyer realized she was running her company alone, he arranged a meeting with Lippitt, the former COO of ePrize, an online promotions outfit that is one of Detroit's fastest-growing companies. Having helped build ePrize to \$30 million in annual revenue and 325 employees, he now helps other local entrepreneurs scale the mountain. In April, he became her \$200-an-hour consultant and first business mentor.

Since Ashley, his youngest client ever, had never taken a class in accounting or read a business book, she needed a crash course on the basics, such as maintaining two accounts, business and personal.

"She was running her business like a piggy bank," says Lippitt, 38.

But he found her to be a quick study and, in many ways, a natural entrepreneur. "She lacks experience, but I was blown away by her instincts," he says. How she makes her layouts compatible with social-networking sites other than MySpace, so her company isn't tied to one site. How she decided to offer her designs as cell-phone wallpaper, creating a new service and revenue stream based on existing inventory. Ashley, he realized, has a vision for Whateverlife that goes beyond a MySpace tools site. It could be a multifaceted community for girls.

Convinced that her fans need help building Web sites, she hired developers in India to create an easy-to-use application and wrote one-teen-to-another tutorials. After the site builder launched in May, though, she told Lippitt she was disappointed by delays and early bugs. Hiccups were common, he assured her; he expected modest results, maybe a few hundred users. But 28,000 signed up in the first week. "There are CEOs across the country who would be dancing in their offices if they got that reaction," he says.

Ashley is the demographic she's serving, which gives her a powerful advantage over far more experienced adults trying to channel their inner teen or glean clues from focus groups. Her site looks and sounds like something made by a teenager, not something manufactured to look that way.

The risk, of course, is that she could lose touch with her audience as she outgrows it. But Lippitt says she already grasps the importance of understanding her customers, not simply assuming they share her taste. She conducts polls about their favorite stores, celebrities, and American Idol contestants. She solicits feedback on new features. And she's thinking of the next step: "I may have to hire people younger than me."

Some days I miss school. I miss the laughter, the lunch lines, the jackass of the class, the evil ass teacher, sometimes I even miss the drama. --August 4, 2006; 1:30 a.m.

On a Wednesday in early June, the gang's all here after school. Well, everyone except Bre. Shayna Bone, 17, and Jen--outfitted in matching Whateverlife T-shirts, featuring row after row of multicolored hearts--sit at a table reviewing their W-4 forms. It's official: The staff is doubling for the summer.

Mike Troutt, 16, who's stretched across a white L-shaped couch, won't be joining them. A past contributor to the Whateverlife magazine, he's working as an apprentice at a local tattoo shop for the summer. He's contemplating where he'll get his first tattoo, he announces. Tomorrow's the big day.

As usual, Ashley is working away at her computer, a new desktop with a touch-screen monitor, one of three computers in her basement. Often, she's up at 7 or working into the wee hours on a "designfest" with Bre, fueled with music and Monster energy drinks.

In just 15 minutes, she creates a layout. Blue and pink streaks on a black background with blocks of pink rap lyrics. Her fingers race across the keyboard as she tries different fonts, sizes, compositions, switching out HTML coding as she talks. "Don't worry," she tells a wary Shayna, "I'll teach you."

Ashley the CEO, who has no fewer than 14 hearts on her business card, is both utterly familiar and a complete mystery to her friends. In some ways, she's the same old "Ash"--or "AshBo," a nickname they coined because she didn't have her own room at one point (Ashley + hobo = AshBo). She still plays *The Sims*, still giggles when Jen laughs like Eddie Murphy, and is still up for silliness, like standing by the road holding a sign that says, HONK IF YOU BELIEVE IN THE LOCH NESS MONSTER, or taking breaks on the swing set down the street.

"One minute, she's joking around with us," says a friend, "and then it's, 'Oh, guys, hold on. I gotta take this call.'"

AshBo looks even younger than 17. She has straight brown hair with light streaks down to the middle of her back. She has a French pedicure, like Jen and her mother. Her clothes are nothing fancy. "I don't need \$2,000 shirts," Ashley says. "I'm fine with Target." Or a University of Michigan sweatshirt over a summer dress.

In other ways, she's an alien among normal teens. She can go on about hiring freelance developers, studying site-traffic trends, calculating ad rates, maintaining low overhead (her main operating

expense is seven servers). "Sometimes when I talk about the site, my friends just stare at me," she says. She carries a BlackBerry and a Coach bag (a recent birthday present to herself). Her friends tease her about her last ring tone, which consisted of The Donald, someone they couldn't care less about, barking, "This is Donald Trump telling you to have an ego!"

Whateverlife has definitely brought out a bolder side. "One minute, she's joking around with us, and then, "Oh, guys, hold on, I gotta take this call,"" says Mike. "She turns it on like a light switch." She's no longer the shy 15-year-old who would ask her mother or father to make a difficult phone call. Who didn't know how to respond to advertisers' cold calls. Who didn't know how to negotiate. Now, it's "Is that the best you can do for me?"

"Something clicked," says her mother, who can be direct herself. "She's not letting people walk over her."

At one point, Ashley takes a call upstairs in the kitchen, where a fax machine sits on the countertop. The company that's building the application for her cell-phone wallpaper is on the line. The developer walks her through the latest mock-up, answering Ashley's questions. She's one of those teens who has mastered the art of talking to adults as a peer, of making eye contact rather than looking down or away at a moment's blush.

Her mother, whom Ashley hired recently to keep the books, listens in, hand on hip, a cigarette cocked. Afterward, she asks, "What was he talking about?"

Ashley translates. She'll ask her mother for advice, but she doesn't necessarily take it. "I'm stubborn, like her," she says. Ashley has more leverage than the typical teen. She's the breadwinner. And yet for all her newfound independence, she still needs to be driven everywhere. She hasn't taken driver's ed because she wants to take the class with a friend, not alone.

Occasionally, she feels the tug of her old life, traditions like Lincoln Park's Spirit Week, when she'd paint her cheeks orange and blue, the school colors. More than once, she has returned, just for the day, hanging out in her French teacher's classroom. Ashley wonders if she'll be allowed to participate in graduation. By then, she may have already earned an associate's degree in design, at Henry Ford Community College.

She's determined to bring her friends along for this strange and wonderful ride. They rode in the limo to her over-the-top sweet-16 party at the local Masonic Temple, where guests wore pink Whateverlife rubber bracelets and the door prize was an Xbox. She took Bre on a family vacation to Hawaii, Ashley's first flight. And when the friends go out--tonight it's to Chili's--she picks up the tab.

"This teenage girl ... got more views for our video than Youtube."

This summer, she's the boss. One of Ashley's friends had pitched in making layouts last year, but things got a tad awkward when Ashley thought her friend's productivity was dipping. Now she insists they've made up--BFF. But after the misunderstanding, she wrote up employee guidelines. She

wanted to spell out her expectations. Lippitt is impressed. She's learning from her mistakes, a challenge for any new entrepreneur.

"I told them I need a minimum of 25 layouts a week to get paid," Ashley says. "It's just business."

Do I keep my site? Do I sell and be set for life? God, it's all so overwhelming. --*August 4, 2006; 1:30 a.m.*

Last year, Steve Greenberg, the former president of Columbia Records and now the head of indie label S-Curve Records, witnessed the power of Whateverlife. Greenberg discovered Joss Stone, produced the Hanson brothers, and helped make Baha Men's "Who Let the Dogs Out" an unofficial sports anthem. Last year, he decided to promote Jonas Brothers, an unknown pop trio, online instead of on radio. He turned to Nabbr, a company that had developed a viral widget, a small desktop application that plays videos and can be easily shared with other sites. It's like "a music poster on a bedroom wall," says Mike More, Nabbr's CEO.

The widget made its Internet debut on Whateverlife. While surfing MySpace for leads, More had noticed how many Jonas Brothers fans used Whateverlife layouts. In less than two months, 60,000 fans transferred the Jonas Brothers' three-part video from Whateverlife to their MySpace pages, in effect becoming 60,000 new distribution points. "This teenage girl in the Midwest got more views for our video than YouTube," says Greenberg, 46. "It wasn't even close." The viral campaign encouraged fans to vote for the band on MTV's *Total Request Live*, and the group's song "Mandy" hit No. 4, unheard of without radio play.

"I created this from nothing, and I want to see how far I can take it."

Since then, Whateverlife has become one of the primary vehicles for Nabbr's viral campaigns for artists and movies, breaking acts such as the Red Jumpsuit Apparatus and 30 Seconds to Mars, as well as Lily Allen. More's staff sends Ashley signed CDs and photos to pass on to Whateverlife fans, and artists record personal shout-outs to her and Whateverlife that play on her site. She's light years ahead of traditional media such as *Teen Vogue*, More says. "If I were Condé Nast, I'd figure out a way to buy her," he says. "I would."

As previous suitors can attest, that wouldn't be easy. In March 2006, an associate of MySpace cofounder Brad Greenspan approached Ashley with a bid valued at more than \$1.5 million. She passed. Three months later, Greenspan's people came back with a second offer: \$700,000, a car, and her own Internet show with a marketing budget of \$2 million.

Sorry, fellas. "I created this from nothing, and I want to see how far I can take it," Ashley says. "If I wanted to do an Internet show, I could do it on my own. I have the audience."

Until now, she has maintained a remarkably low profile in the offline world. Her scheduled appearance on the "Totally Wired Teen Superstars" panel at [Mashup](#), a teen-marketing conference in July, was to be her first public-speaking appearance--and her first business trip. An even bigger gig is possible: her

own reality-TV show. Rick Sadlowski, a TV production executive in Detroit who worked with Eminem when he was still Marshall Mathers, is eager to pitch the idea to MTV. Ashley is mulling it over.

Move over, Paris Hilton. It's Whateverlife: The Not-So Simple Life.

Got evaluated by my therapist for emancipation--need to get a few teachers' written letters; should be cool :) --April 7, 2007; 9:53 p.m.

In February 2006, following a falling-out with her mother, Ashley moved in with her father and older brother. With her business booming, she says, she began supporting them--groceries, bills, rent, renovations. At first, she didn't mind. One of the benefits of Whateverlife was the ability to take care of her family in a way she'd never imagined, certainly not when she was a child overhearing arguments about unpaid bills. Ashley says she bought her brother a used car and paid her grandmother's taxes. The insurance through Whateverlife covered her mother's back surgery. But in August, Ashley moved back in with her mother. She hasn't spoken to her father since. Or to her brother, who later filed (then withdrew) a petition to become her conservator. "I used to trust easily," Ashley says. "I've learned to be careful."

When her brother took his name off a joint bank account with her, Lincoln Park Community Credit Union petitioned the probate court to assign a conservator. After several months, the judge tapped attorney Alan May. He has 40 years' worth of experience with conservatorships, but Ashley's situation makes the case unique in his career. Although May's role is protecting Ashley's interests, it hasn't always felt that way to her, not when she hasn't had complete control over the money she made. But she says, "I don't want this to come across like a war."

Until recently, though, the tension was undeniable. Ashley was unhappy having to get May's approval for expenses such as her mother's nearly \$500-a-week pay. May declined to discuss the case, but in papers filed last spring with the court, he characterized LaBrecque as uncooperative and evasive.

"They're making me out to be the bad guy," Ashley's mother says. LaBrecque, 42, had little growing up herself. Her father worked on the assembly line at General Motors until he died of a heart attack at 42, leaving his wife to raise six kids on Social Security. "It was rough but we survived," she says. "I feel so lucky my daughter doesn't have to live the life I lived."

In mid-July, seven months after being assigned a conservator, Ashley finally sat down with everybody for the first time: her mother, her lawyer, her consultant, her guardian ad litem, and her conservator. She says that she feels much better about the situation.

But that doesn't change the fact that she wants to be on her own. The typical conservatorship case involves a minor with an inheritance or an elderly person who has lost his faculties. "It's unusual to be emancipated to run your own business," says Darren Findling, Ashley's lawyer. "But she's the perfect candidate--an Internet superstar who happens to be a minor."

For now, she's trying to block all this out and concentrate on her business.

On Thursday, while her friends are slaving through exams, Ashley meets with Lippitt for two hours. They couldn't appear more different. He's a low-key, analytical sort with a law degree. Lives on the other side of town, in the tony Bloomfield Hills suburb. Drives a black Lexus, a rarity on her block. As an entrepreneur, though, she relates to him better than anyone else right now.

"I know, I'm always jumping on 10,000 things," Ashley says and then pitches her latest brainstorm, her own social-networking application for girls.

"Hmm," he says. "How do you think the reaction of MySpace would be?"

A teenage CEO, Lippitt is learning, is even more easily distracted and more fearless than an adult entrepreneur. "Failure is an abstract concept to her, and I want it to stay that way," he says. When he was a teenager, his father lost his body shop and had to start over, attending law school in his forties.

Lippitt urges Ashley to prioritize and think about profits as well as design. As clever as her site-building tool is, it doesn't allow a way to run ads on the pages it creates. "You're leaving revenue on the table," he tells her.

At times, Lippitt has to remind himself that she's only 17. "Even if she could go a lot faster, I don't know if that's the best thing for her," he says. "She's already in the adult world doing adult things. I'm reluctant to drive her away from living an important and fun time in her life."

But he's not shy about pushing her when she needs it. Today, he tells her it's time to consider approaching companies to advertise. So far, she has relied largely on Google AdSense, which supplies ads in exchange for what she says is a 40% cut. The direct model is not only potentially more lucrative but also allows her to target brands more suited to teens than, say, Microsoft Office 2007. "I'm not sure that's a good fit," he says of the software ad placed by ValueClick.

Ashley is excited about the idea. And a little nervous. She'll need a sales presentation, a company logo, and ad rates. Eventually, she may want to hire a sales rep, a job she'd never heard of until Lippitt described it. More important, she'll need to sell herself to name-brand companies. "If she can combine 'I'm 17' with a little more about her business, I think she's unstoppable," Lippitt says.

This could be the next growth spurt for Ashley and Whateverlife. It's scary, sure, but she's getting used to the demands and challenges of "this crazy opportunity." She's learning, stretching, getting that much-needed seasoning.

She and Lippitt brainstorm about which brands would resonate with girls like her. This is the fun part. No petitions. No regrets. No family feud. Just a 17-year-old and her big dreams in a pink, pink, pink world full of promise. And if they don't come true? Well, there's always college.

**Source:** Fast Company | **By:** Chuck Salter |