



Kids learn to drive Web way

Driving onto Net

By Brent Hopkins, Staff Writer

NORTH HILLS - Eric Creditor still squirms a little when he remembers learning to drive.

The little, crummy cars, the stuffy lecture hall, the droning on and on about safe stopping distances and when to pump the brakes. It was not an experience that warmed his teenage heart.

"One of my instructors was my ninth-grade history teacher," he recalled, with a twinge of bitterness in his normally upbeat voice. "He was 80 years old and everyone hated him. He was a terrible history teacher and even worse as a driving teacher."

As the co-founder of his own driving school, Creditor takes a different approach. When he and his business partner Chris Kramer started Drivers Ed Direct last summer, they did away with the photocopied tests, the cheesy videos and the lectures. They even gave the classroom the boot.

It took the lifelong friends \$1 million to start up the online venture, a high-tech take on the fairly traditional world of driver education. The partners have been in the traffic school industry since high school, but have now branched out into the tricky world of teaching kids how to drive. In a few months, they expect to turn their novel side project into a money-making endeavor.

The services aren't cheap - \$79 for online instruction, \$399 for the complete program and \$579 for an expanded one that teaches freeway and canyon driving. But while parents have to shell out a considerable amount for the training, those such as Anat Azencot, a Woodland Hills mom who works in the mortgage business, say it's worth the cost. Tech seems to work better for the cell-phone-toting, iPod-listening, Xbox-playing generation, even if it costs more.

"I felt like I could get it done a lot faster (online), and I did," said Anat Azencot's daughter Daniella, 16, a 10th-grader at Sherman Oaks Center for Enriched Studies. "Since I've got schoolwork and everything, I thought I could do this instead of sitting in a classroom."

The company received its license from the Department of Motor Vehicles last April, enabling it to provide instructor and behind-the-wheel training, driving-education classes and the student license program. Normally, students need 25 hours of classroom training before they can take the permit test, but as an unrestricted-time alternative, the DMV allows home study and Internet-based courses so long as they teach the same concepts. With an additional six hours of behind-the-wheel instruction and 50 hours of driving with a licensed driver above the age of 25, permit holders such as Daniella Azencot can take the test to become fully licensed.

She raced through the course in less than five hours, slicing considerable time off a process that used to take weeks. She expects to take the driver test in May after taking lessons from the company's behind-the-wheel division.

Taking instruction out of a classroom and into the animated, interactive realm, Creditor and Kramer offer online instruction through their Web site, DriversEdDirect.com. This serves a statewide audience and extends into behind-the-wheel training for Valley residents. Plans are currently in the works to expand to Glendale and the Westside in the summer, then on to Ventura County and Santa Clarita in 2007.

Drivers Ed Direct has an unusual fleet of cars, as well, consisting solely of hybrid vehicles. The company is in the process of testing video recorders in two of its Toyota Priuses that will provide DVDs to students and parents to show their mistakes and successes post-lesson.

One thing the company lacks, for the moment, is "Red Asphalt," the oddly classic staple of many driving courses. Though Creditor said the firm is considering adding an online link to the shock video, which aims to scare young motorists into meeker driving with its scenes of bad driving and its related highway death, company President Jimmy Leach thinks the younger generation needs interactivity, rather than fear.

"Kids are hit from all directions about how dangerous driving is," said Leach. "They don't need another video to tell them that drinking and driving is a bad idea."

