

Making second language a first priority:

Ellie Wen's honored website uses speeches and literature to help people learn English.

By Michael Ordoña
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Elli Wen is a juggernaut.

Sure, she's only 17 and stands a mere 5 feet 5 inches, but just try to stop this Harvard-Westlake senior from doing what she sets out to do.

She won an award for top overall achievement by a junior at her school last year, was the president of her class and is now co-president of the student body. She writes, acts, sings and studies French, Spanish and Chinese at high levels. She also fences and is, naturally, co-captain of the team. But what truly sets her apart from the many high-achieving students at her school is her deep dedication to community service.

"I've gotten so much out of it," says Ellie, who was also named the top community service performer in her class last year. "I've been touched by so many people who want to help. I'm really grateful. The world is really kind."

Earlier this month, Ellie won the Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes, a national award for teens who have made lasting contributions to their communities. She was honored for creating RepeatAfterUs.com, a free website that matches respected English texts with sound files so that people learning the language around the world can hear it spoken as they read along. The site has had more than 89,000 hits, with around 2,500 a day in a recent observation.

RepeatAfterUs.com includes thousands of famous speeches, poems and literary excerpts that are copyright-free. Sources include William Shakespeare, Sojourner Truth, John F. Kennedy and many others. The voices on the site come from more than a hundred volunteers and spur-of-the-moment recruits.

Jan Stewart, the school's director of community services who nominated Ellie, says she was afraid the project might become just another celebrity list, but instead Ellie surprised her with "her willingness to invite everyone [to read for the site], even if they're not superbly skilled. Ellie said, 'Sometimes the imperfection is what resonates most with the students.'"

Nevertheless, Ellie admits, "I always bring my recorder with me, just in case I run into Brad Pitt."

The idea for the site came to Ellie while she was volunteering at a Los Angeles community center called Las Familias del Pueblo, where she runs a poetry workshop and tutorial program for immigrant children. She was struck by how the students in one of the center's English as a Second Language classes struggled with the pronunciation of simple words.

She says, "I thought, 'What about people in Mongolia? Do they have one-on-one instruction like that?'" She realized that, through the Internet, people all over the world who can't afford lessons from native English speakers could study the language with the accompanying sound files at their own pace. The site went live in July 2003, and Ellie has promoted it through hundreds of e-mails.

She says a few foreign embassies have sent her responses saying they "would make sure they would pass it on to schools and encourage them to use it as a tool."

Barbara Ann Richman, the executive director of the Barron Prize, says Ellie's was the contest's first entry dealing with ESL. "She was solving a problem via technology," says Richman, "making it available to a large part of the world, which was very forward-thinking."

Eva Lerner-Lam, co-president of Princeton University's Alumni Assn. in Beijing, is enthusiastic about using Ellie's site to improve the English skills of otherwise strong candidates for admission to the university from China.

"Pronunciation is so important when you're judging someone's ability, right or wrong," says Lerner-Lam. "The natural tendency is to jump to the conclusion that they don't understand. We know [these candidates] are brilliant, but they're hampered by their spoken English. We hope this tool will be used by these very promising students."

Ellie says, "I've gotten a lot of e-mails from Chinese students saying how useful the site is. I think most of the hits actually come from China."

Fellow Harvard-Westlake seniors Bobby Allen, Allison Karic and Jeffrey Kiok, along with faculty member Jeffrey Porter, are among the core contributors to the site. They collectively say that recording speeches and helping type texts is a small effort for the benefit reaped by ESL students around the world. And working with Ellie is a pleasure, although they admit that she pays them off with pizza.

"She could ask anyone to do anything and she'd just charm them right away," says co-class president Bobby, 17.

Allison, 16, suspects that there's something in the water at Ellie's house that grants the Wen Juggernaut super powers. Jeffrey, 17, expresses the sentiments of the group when he calls her "the nicest person you'll ever meet -- a truly compassionate person."

As her friends effusively praise her, Ellie turns bright red, her tongue poking out between her teeth. She's quick to spread the accolades for the site among all of her collaborators, but her modesty doesn't stop her from persisting to get things done.

A few months into the site's life, serious technical problems caused by either hackers or viruses shut it down, wiping out all of its data. Caught without a recent backup, Ellie was faced with the mountainous task of essentially rebuilding from the ground up. A month later, RepeatAfterUs.com was up and running again.

She devotes much of her free time to maintaining the site and expanding its library (when it went live last year it had about 100 entries; it now has more than 6,000 texts and 1,000 sound files) and continuing her work at Las Familias del Pueblo. She also hopes to add alternate readings to the site.

Ellie says she'd love to become an actress or an English teacher but sees community service work as something she'll be doing for the rest of her life.

Her friend Bobby says, "I would defy anyone to meet her and not fall in love with her instantaneously. She has this incredibly mysterious, charming quality that jumps out at you and grabs you."

"She just loves the world," says Allison.

Jeffrey adds, "... and the world loves her."