

Reunion Web site reaches more than 1,000 members

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Staff Writer

WEST BRANCH — High school classmates are just a click away.

After getting tired of receiving E-mails from online alumni resources that said membership was required to see high school classmates' messages, Ken Hayes, of West Branch, thought it would be a good idea to create a free Web site for Ogemaw Heights High School alumni.

"I thought that if I could make something for my classmates to connect and do it for free, we'd probably get a lot more people participating and it would be a good thing for everyone," he said. "And then I thought, 'Why just my class? Why not all of

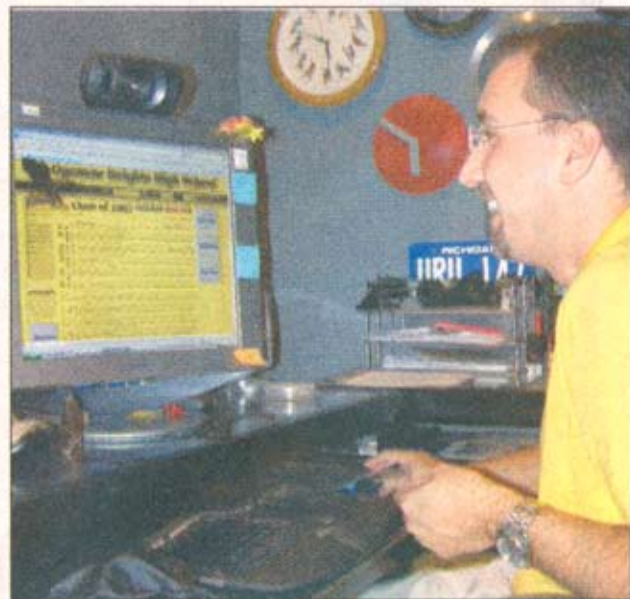
Ogemaw Heights?' And it just blossomed from there."

In the fall of 2006, because the class of 1987's 20-year class reunion was coming up, Hayes thought it would be a good idea to start something online to help organize the event, and catch up on each other's lives. The domain name he wanted — ogemawheights.com — was already taken from someone in another country, so he put in a back order for the name, and received ownership two months later.

"I worked on the site for about a month, and that December it went live," he said.

On the site, alumni and OHHS staff members can create a profile, keep in touch

See **ONLINE**, page 11A



OCH — Elon Brissette

Ken Hayes, designer of ogemawheights.com is looking around his graduating class's news list on the Web site he constructed for OHHS alumni.

LOCAL NEWS

Online

Continued from page 1A

with classmates, and help plan reunions. However, there are uses for the Web site that Hayes said members just don't take advantage of. Class administrators can upload files with classmates' mailing addresses to create labels for invitations, polls for voting, manage the class home page with news, and upload photographs.

Hayes feels that members may not use some of these features because of privacy concerns. He said each member has control over their own information, and how it's shared — "public," so everyone can see the information, "logged in" for only those who have an account, and "my class" for only alumni of the same graduating year.

"It's important to communicate to users that they have control over their own information, and who it gets displayed to," he said. "Some people don't enter any info, and I think it's because they aren't aware of this."

Even if OHHS alumni do not use all the features the Web site offers, Hayes thinks it's important to at least join to have an updated mailing address listed for upcoming reunions.

"People should join the site at bare minimum so that they can keep their name, address on file for their reunion organizers, so at least they get invites to the

reunion," he said.

Among the news OHHS alumni has been posting, such as becoming a new parent and grandparent, moving out of state, starting a new job, and writing a novel, '76 class member Cheri (Hooper) Szemyak posted she is looking for her biological father.

"I really just put it on there because I have been putting it on almost everything. Maybe just hoping someone has an idea I haven't tried yet," Szemyak said. "Like I said, I was just hoping to hear from a friend who knows a friend, who knows a friend, etc. No one has answered or responded in any way to my search."

Hayes says the Web site has been a great success with people using it for all sorts of things, and he even has had other schools contact him with interest in his design. However, according to Hayes, it would cost at least \$2,000, and someone with the technological know-how to create and maintain a custom-built site like *ogemawheights.com*.

"So, my guess is that those schools are probably more focused on their current students, and not their alumni, and therefore not many are investing their funds into ongoing relationships with their alumni," he said.

Hayes has done his Web site completely independent from

Ogemaw Heights High School, but thinks there might be an opportunity to work with the school in the future.

"It's kind of strange for me to be doing this site so disconnected from the school," he said. "They did not contribute to development or fund it, and aren't associated in any way with this site. I think there is opportunity for partnership with Ogemaw Heights, but to be honest, it's never come up in conversation."

Because of Hayes' Web business, GreyHayes Media, *ogemawheights.com* is a free site for OHHS alumni. Through server and bandwidth purchases from GreyHayes Media, donations, and through costs covered by Hayes himself, the site can stay free for the time being.

Hayes hopes that money made from ads and photograph galleries will begin to cover costs, but for now he takes care of it himself simply, "Because I'm nice," he said.

"I'm providing this to OHHS alumni because I think it's important for people to have a way to keep in touch," he added. "There are several of our classmates that we don't know where they went, and/or what's going on in their lives. So, this gives everyone a way to stay in touch, and do it for free."

Members have E-mailed Hayes asking for changes to the site, such as having the option to E-mail the whole class at once, and a directory to be able to find businesses owned by alumni. Hayes would also like a Web coupon area, to allow alumni to vouchers and redeem at local businesses.

"Those things are still very good possibilities, and things I'd like to do, just have to find the time to sit down, and do them, and figure out how to go about it," he said.

This year, Hayes' daughter started her freshman year at OHHS. Recently, he took her to orientation, and felt odd thinking her class will soon be registering at *ogemawheights.com*.

"It was really strange last week taking my daughter to freshman orientation, and walking through those halls again, thinking, 'It will be just a couple years from now, and my child will be registered on *www.ogemawheights.com*,' he said. "Hopefully her class will use it as a tool for keeping in touch with their classmates, and planning their reunions, and stuff."

Since the birth of the Web site on Dec. 27, 2006, 1,171 alumni from the classes of 1969-2008 have registered, including nine staff members. Visit *ogemawheights.com* for more information.