

# Where does having had your own Web page at 12 put you at 20? Ahead of the game.

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Ms. Ruby Sachs describes her upbringing as similarly well-grounded. "We don't have any formality in my family," she says with a laugh. "We swear at each other. I see friends of mine now who are very careful about what they say around kids, and I don't ever remember my parents doing that around me."

"From the age of 5, I was expected to show up at every dinner party and participate in the conversation and have opinions, and I did. I loved it. My opinions were respected. I was completely socially integrated with the adult group. I was loud and extremely precocious."

Now, of course, she is no shrinking violet — and no exception to the rule. A study conducted last year by Toronto-based People Performance Inc. found that people now in their early 20s have much more self-confidence than in the past.

The most aggressive twenty-somethings seem to believe, like the smug young executive played by Topher Grace in the film *In Good Company*, they have more to teach their elders than to learn from them. "They come in with the attitude: 'Show me what you can do for me — right now,'" says Adwoa Bua-hene of People Performance.

This can drive those elders crazy. "I can't tell you how much time I spend sitting in meetings listening to these young hot shots blathering on without a clue," complains a partner at a Bay Street law firm. "I've been practising law for 30 years, but they couldn't care less what I think. They just want to hear themselves talk."

Some of this youthful cockiness may be well-founded. Many demographers consider people in their late teens and 20s the luckiest generation in recent history. Not only will they inherit the vast wealth of a rapidly aging population, they will step into the corner offices vacated when their boomer parents begin to retire in large numbers.

Having grown up during the computer age, they are comfortable with technology and unbelievably well-connected, being in touch with a vast network of people through the Internet since childhood. Where does having had your own Web page at 12 put you at 20? Ahead of the game.

Author Scott Beale considers happiness and optimism to be the birthright of today's young people. He describes North Americans born since 1976 (the year of his own birth) the "millennial generation" and argues in his 2003 book *Millennial Manifesto* that they are primed to become "America's next great generation."

"There are cycles in history that create generations — 'millennials' grew up during the Information Age, after the end of the Cold War, and in an increasingly diverse society," Mr. Beale explained via e-mail from India, where he is doing human-rights work for the U.S. State Department.

"Young people are self-confident because we've grown up during a moderately affluent time and one powered by technology that enables us more than even other generations. We feel that we can change the world, and many young people, in fact, are changing the world. The very youth-negative culture that existed in the seventies has been replaced with one that is at times very supportive of young people."

A survey by Ranstad, the international employment service, confirms the impression that Canadians 18 to 24 years old have higher job expectations than their older colleagues, and are always looking for a better offer. The study found that only 36 per cent of people in their early 20s wanted to be working in the same place two years from now.

CBS-TV's *60 Minutes* recently devoted an entire program to the echo boom, reporting that it already makes up one-third of the U.S. population and spends \$170-billion



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— Zak Werner, *Canadian Idol* judge

(U.S.) a year, "almost none of it on boring things like mortgages and medication."

However, all this self-assurance seems to culminate in a certain amount of disappointment. In the age of self-esteem where everybody — not just the best and the brightest — get gold stars beside their names in school, who expects to start at the bottom?

As a judge on *Canadian Idol*, television's showcase for the young and self-assured, Zak Werner sees the effects of this sense of entitlement up close every day. And according to him, it isn't pretty.

"I'll never cease to be amazed by the incredibly positive attitude of young people without talent," says the music producer, who is famous for his penchant for unvarnished putdowns. "I meet people all the time and think, 'Hey, this kid is great, he's upbeat, he comes from a good family, he's willing to do anything, and yet he has absolutely no chance in hell of making it because he sucks.'"

"The unwillingness of those people to admit the obvious amazes me."

The Ranstad report found that, unlike today's young people, two-thirds of famously over-educated and under-employed Gen X "slackers" actually take pride in their work.

"In contrast, only about four in 10 Gen Yers feel this satisfaction, and only a little over half are proud of the work they do."

Thursday night at the Madison Pub in downtown Toronto: There's a lineup out the door and the bouncers are carding. Inside, the kids are ripping it up — girls in low-rise jeans and guys in polo shirts, drinking beer, expelling beer or clamouring for more.

In the middle of the room, a pianist plays a lounge version of *Island in the Sun* by alt-rockers Weezer. A few patrons have gathered around the bar to sing along. They sway in their seats and roll their eyes at the cheesy jazz improvisations the piano man substitutes for the guitar riffs of the original.

Suddenly, as if on cue, two girls in tank tops stand and pretend to be backup singers. Their act is impressive, complete with synchronized chorus-line dance moves. Soon the crowd is begging for more. The piano is lost in the din of lusty "woohoo's!"

The young women throw their hands to their faces and laugh,

feigning shock at their own brazen behaviour. But beneath their wide-eyed expressions of surprise is a gleam of triumph. The audience has officially upstaged the performance.

Despite their privilege and swagger, many of the kids here long for something better than good, something *extra*. There is a sense of frustration in the air. As if the world promised them something and it hasn't quite delivered.

"It's not enough just to have a good job, and nice friends and family," says Scott Chapman, 23, sitting with friends at a table loaded with draft pitchers. "Older people might think it's enough, but I want more."

"Exactly," adds Josh Lieberman, also 23. "I mean, so you're brought up to feel good about yourself. So you have confidence. What does it really get you in the end? Will it make you happy?"

Clean-cut with trendy duds and perfect teeth, the two are recent grads in their first jobs (in sales and marketing, respectively). They're also remarkably confident and super-keen to talk about themselves and their expectations for the future, rather than their hopes.

Mr. Lieberman wants to be the general manager of a hockey team. Mr. Chapman says he would like to make a lot of money without having to work too hard.

It is impossible not to look at them and think of the old adage about youth being wasted on the young.

There are go-getters, and there is Craig Kielburger. At 21, he is the poster boy for his generation — a kid with a résumé that would make most boomers quake in their Rockports.

Known as the founder of Free the Children, an international relief organization twice nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, he is also co-author of three social-studies texts for high schools.

And in his spare time, he runs leadership and self-esteem training camps in Canada and overseas, where kids as young as 8 learn public-speaking, negotiating and role-playing skills in order to build self-esteem and achieve their goals. (The slogan says it all: "We are the generation we have been waiting for.")

Mr. Kielburger credits his upbringing. At 12, he persuaded his parents to let him travel to China on his own to meet some of the kids he'd been working with on one of

his organization's child-labour projects. "We never had curfews or allowance," he recalls. "I don't think my parents ever spoke a harsh word to us. The worst punishment was to be told, 'We're disappointed in you.'"

Something clearly worked, both for him and his brother, Marc, a Harvard graduate, Rhodes scholar and Oxford-educated lawyer who now helps to run Save the Children. "I used to think we were extreme," Mr. Kielburger says. "But running the leadership camp, I realized we're just the norm."

How normal is it to send little kids to public-speaking camp? A skeptic might see this as the sign of a generation willing to stop at almost nothing to get what it wants. But Karyn Gordon doesn't necessarily think so.

The Toronto-based psychotherapist and "parent-teen coach" has developed an interactive self-esteem road show that she has taken on the road to more than 800 high schools across North America. Entitled *Spill Your Guts*, the show uses televised celebrity testimonials and free food from sponsors Pizza Hut and Pepsi to raise awareness about issues related to self-esteem. The school auditorium is turned into a mock *Jerry Springer Show* and the kids come on stage and participate in what Ms. Gordon calls "self-esteem improv."

She makes a firm distinction between what she calls false or "disguised" self-esteem ("cockiness, the urge to put everybody else down,) and healthy self-esteem ("the ability to accept both one's own strengths and weakness while respecting others").

"What's happened in the past 20 years is that the pendulum is swinging the other way in the home," she explains. "The family unit has changed enormously. I wrote my dissertation on overindulgence, which is spoiling but not just of the material sense. More and more teens are being overindulged as children and as a result developing the disguised attitude of self-esteem."

"When I explain this to parents, you can hear a pin drop. A lot of parents are over-functioning — driving kids around, talking to professors even though their kids are in university. Because of this, kids develop an attitude of entitlement. We're just starting to see the ripple effect in the school system."

She tries to teach over-functioning parents and overindulged offspring a better way to interact, but

**'It's not enough just to have a good job, and nice friends and family,' says Scott Chapman, left. 'Older people might think it's enough, but I want more.'**

**'Exactly,' adds Josh Lieberman, far left. 'So you're brought up to feel good about yourself... What does it really get you in the end?'**

insists that healthy self-esteem is the path to future success.

Toronto author and cultural theorist Hal Niedzviecki is highly critical of the Gordon ethic, which, in his view, sells young people a myth — that their wildest dreams will be come true if they just "believe in themselves."

In his book *Hello, I'm Special: How Individuality Became the New Conformity*, Mr. Niedzviecki argues that the approach can fill young people with false confidence that is more likely to hinder than help them.

"In terms of societal implications, it's intensely harmful to tell people that they can achieve whatever they want in an environment that is in fact intensely regulated," he says. "The self-esteem ethic is always inward and so it teaches people that all their failings, specifically their failing to achieve pop cultural success, celebrity or richness or beauty... is their fault, and so there's no sense that we may be facing systemic social problems."

Mr. Niedzviecki is dismissive of a self-esteem culture that produces young people so cocky their bosses can't get a word in edgewise at a meeting.

"You can't really blame parents for dreaming big for their kids," he says. "But you can blame schools for being sucked into the pop psychology of the moment."

"I don't think there's any context which kids should be taken into an auditorium and exposed to sound bites from pop stars."

Zak Werner couldn't agree more. Watching youngsters lining up to become the next Canadian pop idol has left him critical of the celebrity-obsessed culture that pushes a delusional self-esteem ethic.

"These kids come up to me and they tell me how incredibly focused and hard-working they are, so driven, and they know it's going to happen to them. And you know what? It's the most boring story in the world. I hear it every day. It's like they think, if they try hard enough, they'll become the fairy princess."

"Well, stop wasting my time and yours, and play your little gigs on the weekend, and get on with your life — because it's not going to happen."

The Werner message is not a popular one. But in a culture that promotes the myth that anyone can become a star, he says he is doing his part to attempt to combat the disappointment that many young millennials are bound to feel eventually.

"Little kids are so much more realistic," he says. "You'll ask them what they want to be when they grow up, and they'll say a swimming teacher because they think that would be a really cool thing to do. Then something happens to them when they're teenagers and they get sucked into the pandemic of celebrity culture."

"I can't tell you the number of people in their 20s who tell me, 'I was shy and now I'm outgoing and happy because I'm working toward my goal of being a star,' and I think, 'Well, I hope you like working at a bar, because that's where you're going to end up.'"

So, what happens when, as Mr. Werner points out so bluntly, today's young people realize that the real world can't always match their great expectations?

Emma Ruby Sachs certainly isn't angling for a spot on *Canadian Idol*, but she admits that being catapulted into the uncaring real world has been a bit of a shock.

"After school, it's really disappointing," she says, smiling wryly as she takes another sip of her cocktail. "You still want someone saying you're wonderful every two weeks. You want to hand in the paper and get back the A."

"I wish someone would pay me to attend dinner parties because I'm great at it. But, unfortunately, it's not going to happen."

Leah McLaren is a *Globe and Mail* feature writer whose weekly column appears in the *Style* section.