

Not ready for SAT? Teen's Web site may be the answer

March 20 2009, By Leslie Postal

In the week leading to the most recent SAT college-admission exam, some 600 students logged on to the INeed APencil Web site. There, they reviewed lessons, quizzed themselves on grammar and quadratic equations and even took full-length practice tests.

The INeedAPencil company is a small player in the test-prep world_and an unusual one. Its site is free, and it was created by a 19-year-old from New Smyrna Beach.

Jason Shah hatched the company while a student at Spruce Creek High. Since he launched it in April 2007, more than 24,000 students have used INeedAPencil .com to practice for the [SAT](#). Probably many of these teenagers don't realize the site was created by someone who is still one of them.

Shah, a sophomore at Harvard University, won a \$40,000 [college scholarship](#) for his entrepreneurial effort. The site he started with a loan from his parents is now a for-profit venture that he manages alongside his schoolwork.

Of his early business success, Shah said: "To be honest, I think I kind of fell into it. . . . I wasn't the kid with the lemonade stand."

Frustration was his initial motivation, his older sister his initial inspiration. She was teaching at a struggling Philadelphia school, and after visiting her, he became interested in helping [disadvantaged students](#)

He later worked to start a tutoring program at Spruce Creek. But as a tutor, he found going over practice SAT exams tedious.

"I don't want sit here grading these tests; let's put it online," he thought.

So in early 2006, the then-11th-grader sketched out a plan for a free SAT-prep Web site. With his parents' help, he hired someone to design the site and professional curriculum specialists to write the lessons and quizzes. He did the final editing, he said, to make the site conversational and appealing to teenagers.

What did he use?

To prepare himself for the SAT, Shah relied only on an SAT practice book that he went through diligently each weekend. He aced it, scoring above 700 on each of the test's three sections (800 is the top score possible). So he was convinced that if students had the right help, many others could do well without using expensive tutoring classes.

Evan Kendall, 16, a Massachusetts high-school student, started using the Web site about three months ago, after seeing a message about it on Facebook.

"Whenever I am on a computer, I have access to it and I don't have to lug around a 10-pound book with me just to prepare for the SAT," said Kendall, an 11th-grader at Sharon High in Sharon, Mass., via e-mail. "In addition, the site is usually quick and easy to navigate so it makes it simple to zero in on whatever I want to do."

Kendall, who took the SAT last Saturday, said he thought INeedAPencil was better preparation than a prep-course he took last year. He liked its

step-by-step instructions and its ability to personalize lessons.

"I felt much more confident after using INAP on a consistent basis more than any other resource," he added.

Initially, Shah spread the word about his new test-prep company by putting fliers on cars and talking up his site to schools and community groups. Not everyone was interested, he said, including some local schools, but the McKelvey Foundation -- created by the late Andy McKelvey, who started Monster.com - was impressed.

ENTREPRENEURIAL AWARD

Shah applied for one of the foundation's "entrepreneurial scholarships" awarded annually to high-school students running their own businesses. In 2007, he was one of 52 winners, chosen from among about 1,000 teenagers who applied, said Christine McKelvey, the founder's daughter and president of the foundation, which gives away about \$3.5 million in scholarships a year.

Other recent \$40,000 winners have run a retail clothing store, a swim-lesson organization and a video-gaming camp. Shah, who is majoring in sociology and has future career interests in advertising and digital media, is just the sort of student the foundation wants to help.

"He's really a go-getter. He's just a bright, driven, intelligent, mature kid," McKelvey said. "No matter what this guy does, he's going to be successful."

Spruce Creek administrator Scott Hallett said Shah was much the same in high school. The two met when Shah joined the model United Nations club, which Hallett sponsored. Shah later took a psychology class Hallett taught in the International Baccalaureate program.

"He's probably one of the best students I've ever had," Hallett said.

In Spruce Creek's yearbook, he added, Shah fittingly was voted "most likely to succeed."

Tips, Web sites to help prep for the SAT

Upcoming SAT dates are May 2 and June 6.

A few helpful ways to prepare:

Free, independent advice _ Jason Shah launched his SAT-prep site in 2007 while a senior at Spruce Creek High in Port Orange, Fla. He picked the name thinking 'I need a pencil' is 'the battle cry of students who walk into the SAT unprepared.' The Web site is free.

ineedapencil.com

College Board: The SAT, taken by more than 2 million people a year, is the creation of the College Board. The association provides its own free test-preparation center. tinyurl.com/2v8tj5

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