

Calling business professionals ...

## Career-classroom connection gels

Spokane to serve as pilot for Access2Experience platform

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Economic and workforce development groups here are promoting a newly launched Spokane-based online business, Access2Experience LLC, as a platform for connecting business professionals with students and educators to inspire future career decisions.

Greater Spokane Incorporated is among those spreading the word about the Web-based venture launched in May, along with Tyler Lafferty, who co-owns the business with Nick Murto. Lafferty says the platform enables professionals to register to speak in classrooms and to offer student internships, tours, and job shadowing.

Lafferty and Murto also are business partners in Spokane-based Seven2 Inc. and 14Four Inc., sister companies that provide digital and Web-based design services for national clients' online and mobile application projects.

The new venture's website, [www.access2experience.com](http://www.access2experience.com), also enables educators to search for and network with listed business professionals for student learning opportunities, as well as for students and job seekers to search career options and companies here based on work interests.

"The goal is not only to connect professionals and teachers; we're also trying to get students to understand what they might be interested doing as a career," Lafferty says. "As we get more professionals to connect with them, hopefully it will light a passion for where they may want to work."

Use of the website is free to the professionals, students, and teachers. For revenue, the business eventually will seek yearly subscriptions paid by economic development and education groups here and in other cities that see a value in networking with a future workforce.

Lafferty adds, "We wanted to create a website where a professional can say, 'Yes, I'm willing to talk in a classroom,' and describe jobs the students may be interested in pursuing. Then teachers can search based on industries and based on job titles and key words based on a professional's bio."

The Spokane Area Workforce Development Council also is promoting the website, especially as a tool for people ages 16 to 24 to gain work-related experiences. The council cites a high unemployment rate here for youth. In 2012, Spokane County showed an unemployment rate of 25 percent for 16- to 19-year-olds and 17 percent for 20- to 24-year-olds—far higher than the overall unemployment rate in the county of 8.6 percent, the council says.

"We're interested in helping students

explore all careers in the Spokane area," says Dawn Karber, the council's chief operating officer. "This gives them a local source for information that doesn't exist anywhere else, and also access to work-learning opportunities."

Lafferty, who is a GSI board member and serves on a GSI education panel, is speaking about Access2Experience before groups to attract more Spokane-area businesses and individual professionals to register on the website, before it's promoted heavily to teachers in November.

"We've partnered with GSI and the Spokane workforce council just in the marketing and getting the word out," he says.

Within the state and nationwide, educators and business people are discussing how to bring more real workplace application into the classroom, particularly for science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) learning, says Alisha Benson, GSI director of education and workforce.

Benson says GSI is informing its members about the new website as a way to increase that interaction. She says the organization hears separately from both educators and businesspeople that they'd love to bring more workplace experiences into the classroom, but people on both sides often are unsure how to connect.

"Access2Experience helps bridge that gap between education and businesses," Benson says. "Tyler has been a catalyst for that in our region."

By early 2014, Lafferty and Murto plan to spread the website's networking to other cities in the state, likely starting with Seattle, Tri-Cities, and Vancouver, and eventually to expand it across the U.S.

Access2Experience has a drop-down menu that will enable users to select separate locations, such as Seattle, to access registered business-educator networks for those areas.

Lafferty says the Spokane platform currently has 25 educators, 81 businesses, and 31 speakers registered.

"Ideally, we'd like to push that number up to 300 professionals who are in Spokane," Lafferty says. "We're working on tactics right now and starting a big push going out and speaking to people in Spokane who would be interested."

Because Spokane is the pilot city for the website's launch, Lafferty says the business currently doesn't have any incoming revenue and isn't charging GSI or any other organizations here. He says he doesn't have a clear timeline for when that might happen. The business likely would charge an annual fee based on population, and for Spokane, that amount would be roughly \$20,000, he says.

The venture also might offer sponsoring opportunities to businesses in the future,



—STAFF PHOTO BY TREVA LIND

Access2Experience co-founder Tyler Lafferty and GSI's Alisha Benson are promoting the recently launched website.

Lafferty adds.

For now, Lafferty says he and Murto are paying for all capital investment toward the website, which they began developing about a year ago. In addition to the owners' work, Access2Experience has one employee, a program manager, who is based at the Seven2 and 14Four offices at 244 W. Main in downtown Spokane.

Lafferty, who graduated from Mead High School and earned a political science degree from the University of Washington, says he speaks at least once a month in schools. The visits are mainly at high schools and colleges here to talk about career and education opportunities.

"It's been a real passion of mine," he says. "A lot of people talk about the value of connecting educators with professionals. Our goal is to help bridge the gap between industry and education. We've talked to educators, and they want more access to professionals in the real world."

Major goals for the business include sparking career interests, perhaps even in jobs young people hadn't thought of before, and ultimately to build a stronger workforce for the future, Lafferty says.

He adds that he's talked to young people who returned from a job shadowing experience, and they either returned excited about the option or found it didn't appeal to them the way they'd thought it would.

"Both experiences are valuable," he adds. "It helps them maybe better understand what they might want to do as a future career."

He says he envisions that the site will be valuable to teachers of students from primary grades all the way to college. For students using the website, it likely will be

most attractive to those in middle school to college-aged students, he adds.

The workforce council here also operates the Next Generation Zone, a youth employment center, located at 901 E. Second, Karber says. She says counselors at the center likely will refer students often to the site as a tool to gain work-related experiences.

The center offers job search assistance, work readiness classes, financial literacy assistance, and links to internships and volunteer opportunities to more than 2,000 Spokane-area youth a year.

"We want a student-employer connection," Karber adds.

GSI's Benson, meanwhile, says that one of the organization's overall visions is to increase educational attainment for students as the future workforce here, and so aligning with Access2Experience makes sense.

"Having a highly educated workforce is critical from an economic development standpoint," she says. "The first step is the linkage between business professionals and teachers. The next component is being able to create a way to grow job shadowing opportunities, internships, and tours to bring students into a work environment and learn about the skills they need to work in a 21st century local economy."

She adds, "We're excited to be a partner with Tyler and with the workforce council. The next piece is really inviting business professionals. We're not going to create the workforce of tomorrow without bringing business and education to the table."

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