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Internships are steps toward dreams

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DeWarren Langley likes to think positively, and he's practical enough to realize that he doesn't yet know everything needed to achieve his dreams.

But he knows the steps to get there and how to take the help others offer.

A rising sophomore at Jordan High School, Langley has spent hours of his summer riding the bus from his West End home to his internship at PRI, a software company near Research Triangle Park.

It takes two hours to get there and two hours to get home.

But despite those travel difficulties, Langley said this internship is "probably the best I've had." He's learned the programming language SAS and used a spreadsheet program to automate an NCAA basketball office pool - an assignment from his boss.

While he once wanted to become a lawyer, now Langley can envision his future as a computer programmer, with some of those all-important computer skills already learned.

This job is only one of the mind-expanding programs Langley participates in as part of the Duke-Durham Partners for Youth, a mentoring and summer internship program for teens who live in southwest-central Durham.

Partners for Youth is part of the Duke-Durham Neighborhood Partnership Initiative, which was developed jointly by Duke University and the Southwest Central Durham Coalition to provide teen-agers with summer employment and exposure to new careers. Funding is provided by the Duke Endowment, a Charlotte-based foundation.

This year, 18 teens aged 14 to 17 participated in the summer internships, which began June 15. They came from the West End, Lyon Park, Lakewood Park, Tuscaloosa/Lakewood and Burch Avenue neighborhoods. A celebration dinner marking the end of the internships was held Thursday.

Each student is assigned four mentors - one on the job site, a teacher, a Duke student tutor and someone from the student's community. Students are also required to keep a journal over the summer, passages from which they display at the awards dinner.

Peter Skalak, Langley's supervisor, said this program provides PRI "a good way ... to give back to the Durham community. DeWarren is a pleasure to have around, a bright and energetic young man."

Skalak called the basketball pool computer program a "very important program."

"We could put it on [America Online] next spring, charge a dollar, and we'll all be millionaires," he said. The skills Langley learns on spreadsheets are extremely flexible, Skalak said.

"So the usage he could get out of doing this fun project can be very serious," he said.

Partners for Youth interns are placed at a variety of locations this summer, including the Busy Street children's museum, the Duke Private Diagnostic Clinic, the West End Community Center, Duke University Medical Center and Duke's Perkins Library.

Two students in the program have spent the summer in the labyrinthine back rooms of Perkins, coding new books - junior Sean Gooze of Jordan and junior Candace Sherald of Southern High School.

Gooze, a soft-spoken young man, said he likes the library for "how relaxing it is."

"It's not too busy, not too loud or anything," he said. "It's soothing."

This is Gooze's second year working at the library with the Partners for Youth program. Gooze said his favorite part is the tutoring provided by Duke students, because it "helps us get homework done," for subjects he needs help in, such as math or social studies.

Gooze plans to pursue a career in health, perhaps becoming a doctor.

Sitting across from where Gooze works Sherald, a confident teen with shoulder-length hair. She also said working in the library is nice, because it's easy to concentrate.

Sherald is an old-timer to the program; she's been doing internships for three years, first at the Museum of Life and Science, then at a YMCA summer camp.

Sherald wants to become a pediatrician or a nurse someday.

Kelley Dodson, Sherald's and Gooze's boss, said they both have learned a lot of library skills, such as searches on computers.

"They've learned a lot about programs and how they can break," she said. The young helpers give the library staff a fresh outlook, Dodson said.

"We're learning what they face every day. Candace, at Southern High School, has to go through metal detectors. Learning things from their point of view has been great, and watching the sheer amount of work they have accomplished," she said.

Leigh Bordley, the Partners for Youth coordinator, said the program also introduces students to college campuses, trying to whet their minds for future endeavors. They also take trips together. This year students wrote policy positions on homelessness and student privacy, then presented their work to North Carolina's U.S. Senate delegation in Washington.

Next year, they'll probably travel to Atlanta to study black history, she said. Students who live in southwest central neighborhoods can start applying now for the program, which can accept up to 25 students at a time. Applications can be found at churches, community centers and the guidance office at Jordan High School.

Langley said he knows the computer field is expanding so fast that more jobs will require computer literacy. He credits Bordley for finding the PRI internship and helping no matter what the issue, from schoolwork to encouraging him to do his best.

"If you think positive, positive things happen. If you think negative, negative things happen. There's no 'what if?' " he said.

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