

Deaf students exhibiting an acute sense of calling

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by Greg Livadas

Staff writer

(July 27, 2005) — A school setting might be the last place many rising high school seniors would like to spend summer vacation, but more than 200 of them are doing just that at Rochester Institute of Technology's National Technical Institute for the Deaf.

They're getting a taste of possible careers during the Explore Your Future program, a five-day camp for deaf and hard-of-hearing high school students, while meeting others from around the country just like them.

"I came to find out what major matches my interests and try to break some of my shyness and be more social," Amy Illion, 17, of Chicago, said using sign language.

Wendell Ratliff, 18, of Columbia, S.C., heard about the program through friends at the South Carolina School for the Deaf. They said he had to attend because of his interest in mechanical engineering.

Some said they felt a bit isolated in their schools at home, where they may be the only deaf student.

"Where I live, I don't see the community I see here," said Michael Berrios, 17, a hard-of-hearing student from New York City.

Jean Bondi-Wolcott, coordinator of the EYF program for 21 of its 22 years, said the program is updated each year "to be on the cutting edge of technology."

Students with similar communication preferences — oral, American Sign Language or both — were split into groups. They learned about professions that helped others, such as teaching, nursing and social work, as well as careers involving computer graphics and engineering.

In one session, Todd Pagano, a science teacher at NTID, walked five girls through experiments to help them solve a mock crime: the sudden death of an elderly woman who ate poisonous blueberries.

Using a hypodermic needle and an infrared spectrophotometer, they looked for evidence of arsenic, cyanide and dioxin. Pagano used caffeine to duplicate the reaction of the toxic compound dioxin.

"We're going to test for a specific kind of heart medicine right now. If it stays flat, it shows no medicine in there," Pagano said.

After examining DNA from a hair sample left at the crime scene, the students concluded that the victim's neighbor had poisoned her to inherit her house.

Meanwhile, another set of students worked together to build a miniature theater set.

"It's really jaw-dropping to see the skills they have, and sometimes they didn't even realize they had the skills themselves," said team leader Joe Hamilton, 36, of Chili, who took EYF in 1986 when he was about to be a high school senior.

Just like real college students, they stay overnight in the dormitories and eat meals at the cafeteria.

Karl Allison, 18, of Noble, Okla., settled down to a lunch of pepperoni pizza, a fish sandwich and Mountain Dew.

"I had cancer when I was 11 or 12 and it killed my hearing, so my mom wanted me to come to check the school out and meet people,"

he said.

The groups also go ice skating, bowling, swimming, have a cultural dinner and dance and visit Seabreeze Park, Bondi-Wolcott said.

While she said the program emphasizes careers, not majors, about 70 percent of participants historically apply to NTID, she said. Of those, about 70 percent are accepted.

Michael Sinnott, of Brighton, whose son, Ethan, graduated from NTID, knows most high school students don't know what they want to do for a career.

"They're teenagers. They've got 55 things on their mind," he said.

Sinnott is one of several adults who speak to the groups during the program to offer advice from personal experience.

"After something like this, they are more motivated for college studies, whether they are here or someplace else," Sinnott said.

Frank DeMauro, 18, of Acworth, Ga., attended the first five-day program last week.

"He enjoyed it," said his mother, Stephanie DeMauro-Black.

"He made a few new friends and enjoyed the staff. He loved the school. He's interested in pursuing engineering and he's hoping to get in there and attend the school there."

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