Internship helped local teen narrow her post-secondary focus

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An internship typically provides students with extraordinary learning opportunities and experiences that can help them describe a specific area of study or career path. Often, internships happen during students’ college years. But when the chance to explore a potential field of interest occurs before their senior year in high school, the results can be life-changing.

This past summer, Ouray School senior Elizabeth Williams spent 8 weeks at the Rodham Institute and George Washington School of Medicine and Health Sciences. Her internship, focusing on healthcare and social change, was one of 23 granted to rising high school seniors in the region by Telluride’s Pinhead Institute.

Williams, whose area of interest is linguistics, was flexible and curious enough to take on the challenge of spending a good part of her summer on the East Coast.

“There wasn’t really a program for my specific area of interest, but I was interested in exploring the Washington, D.C. area, because I thought I might be interested in applying to schools there,” said Williams. “Even though my internship wasn’t directly related to linguistics, I’m so happy that I had this opportunity.”

Williams shared a particularly rewarding moment while shadowing a doctor at George Washington Hospital.

“I was able to communicate with a Spanish-speaking patient,” said Williams. “She was so much more comfortable with someone who could actually understand her. Such a small effort made her relax, and it made me realize how inequitable healthcare can be for different populations.”

The program also allowed her to interact with inner-city youth participating in the Rodham Institute’s Health Education and Leadership Program, where teens are nurtured academically to pursue careers in science, technology, engineering and mathematics. The program also encourages youth to pursue healthcare careers and to work in underserved areas like D.C.’s 7th and 8th wards, where they live.

“Working with these students really made an impact on me, because they gave me a perspective I never had before,” said Williams. “I was exposed to what diversity looks like in the real world and I saw the inequalities that exist in healthcare. It makes me want to explore a different career path. Now I’m thinking of possibly a major in international studies with a minor in another language or a double major with another language.”

Williams has taken Spanish since elementary school and is currently taking French.

“I also want to travel after college, so my dream job might be teaching abroad in an underserved area like South America.”

Williams said the internship provided a unique opportunity for independence, too. She shared an overview of the program with her Ouray School classmates at a short presentation last week.

“I traveled to and from the Rodham Institute each day on the Metro,” said Williams. “And I was able to spend hours by myself in museums on the weekends. It was great to just walk out the door and not have to tell anyone where I was going.”

Williams encouraged her classmates not to be afraid of stepping outside of their comfort zones. “The experience, in general, was amazing. It’s a way to connect what you’re interested in with STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) to see what careers actually look like. Plus, you make a lot of friends.”

Her journey is not over yet. Williams has been invited back to D.C. in November to attend the Institute’s 5th Annual Summit on healthcare.

Former first lady Hillary Rodham Clinton, who founded the Institute in honor of her late mother Dorothy Rodham, will speak at a fundraiser the evening prior.

Williams will travel with Sarah Hollbrooks, executive director of Pinhead Institute.

“Both was a great candidate because of her intellectual curiosity, her open-minded approach to whatever placement we would find and because I was already aware of her interest long before we even received her application,” said Hollbrooks. “I have to work closely, one-on-one with the students, and it works best when we form a team. I knew she would be right there with me, advocating for a great summer internship experience.”

Williams and all 2017 interns will talk about their unique experiences at the Sheridan Opera House on Oct. 11.

“If students are seriously interested in applying for an internship with Pinhead Institute,” said Hollbrooks, “they need to be at this presentation. It’s a requirement.”

Refreshments will be served at 5:30 p.m.; the presentations begin at 6:30 p.m.

Richard and Ouray school districts both boast past internship recipients.