

OPINION

A Head Start

How an undergraduate internship helped a student from the projects explore his love of science.



Jefferson (right),
with Deena Walker.

Waking up to gun shots in the middle of the night and watching my neighbors go to jail for dealing drugs was just another day in the San Antonio public housing projects. My parents both worked laborious jobs. My mother was a Laundromat attendant; my father cut grass and washed windows. They referred to themselves as “mules,” believing that once their bodies were worn from hard labor they would be out of work. My parents wanted better for me – for my hard work not to be in vain. When I greeted my exhausted parents after a long day, their words sunk in a little more.

Throughout elementary and middle school my favorite subject was science, and I dreamed of being a doctor or a scientist. I did well in school, participated in science fairs, and looked forward to class every day. School was my escape from the poverty-stricken slums where I lived.

While my peers argued at recess about who was the toughest “Transformer,” and who would throw a rock to break the next window of the local crack house, my mind was busy with thoughts of electrons, anatomy, and ionic compounds. Becoming part of science and medicine was a dream so far away from me, like a distant planet I could discover only by leaving home.

I enrolled at The University of Texas at Austin as a human biology major on the premedical track. I was the first person in my family to attend college. My classes at UT were large and intimidating, with auditorium seating for three hundred classmates. I quickly lost my sense of belonging. I felt insignificant on a huge campus.

With my new role in the academy, I had no real mentor. Most of my classmates had parents with advanced degrees who were part of science and medical networks. I was intimidated and felt disadvantaged. Without contacts, connections, and resources, I was a step behind my peers who had parents as role models and mentors.

With the help of an advisor, I enrolled in the Pre-Graduate School Internship, an initiative of the Intellectual Entrepreneurship (IE) Consortium, founded and directed by Richard Cherwitz in the Division of Diversity and Community Engagement. Since its inception in 2003, the internship has enrolled more than 300 students, representing nearly every academic discipline. It provides undergraduates with an opportunity to explore their academic and professional passions, enabling students to own their education. Almost 50% of interns are underrepresented minority or first-generation students.

A major component of the internship is discovering how graduate education can help one make meaningful contributions to society. Undergraduates work closely with a graduate student mentor and/or faculty supervisor to create an internship experience from the ground up, exploring their chosen field of study as well as the implications that their work can have for their communities.

Deena Walker, a graduate student in neuroscience, was my mentor. From her I learned various lab techniques and discussed the life of a graduate student. As the semester progressed, I became more involved with her lab, starting as a volunteer washing lab dishes, handling rats, and learning special rat surgeries. I also established social networks with other undergraduates, graduate students, and professors.

At the end of the semester-long IE Pre-Graduate School Internship, Andrea Gore, the professor in charge of the lab, allowed me to officially join her team. Deena was a great role model; in addition to helping me acquire the skills of working in a laboratory environment, she was a friend to whom I could turn for advice. Ruby Morúa Olmanson, associate director of the IE Internship, was another role model; we share a similar background of struggle and adversity, allowing me to tell my story.

Because of IE my future is on a set path. As an intellectual entrepreneur, I now see a multitude of options for my continued education, having more control over my academic future and success. I have experienced adversity on my way to success and happiness. Adversity shaped me into the ambitious, courageous person I am today. I will always be the boy from San Antonio's projects who followed his heart and dreams. ■

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