

HEALTH



Becky Rose, a 15-year-old from Baltimore County, practices compressions during her CPR course at Camp ECHO, which was held at St. Agnes Hospital. For a week in July, high school students learn more about the various aspects of the health care profession.

At this camp, teens learn the daily lives of health professionals

By Angela J. Bass

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Ashley Jones was set on becoming a professional soccer player. But by the end of a local summer health camp for teens, she was chasing a career in nursing.

Jones, now 21, participated in the first annual Camp ECHO (Exploring Careers in Healthcare Organization), a five-day summer immersion program — now in its sixth year at St. Agnes Hospital — that exposes state high school students to the many sides of the health care professions.

Participants — seven girls this year — spend five hours a day peeking in on surgeries in the operating room, training for adult and child CPR certification or shadowing physicians and nurses, dietitians and radiologists, and other staff.

Jones, who is one year shy of earning her bachelor's degree in community health from Hofstra University on Long Island, N.Y., liked the camp so much she is back to help while she is interning this summer in St. Agnes' administrative department. "I'd always thought about being a nurse, helping people and giving back to the community," she said "This program sealed it for me."

Each year, the program accepts the first 12 applicants. Eighty dollars covers meals, materials, a medical scrub top and the CPR registration fee. Applicants, who come from all over the state, are asked to write a short essay about why they want to be in the program.

"In our initial planning stages there was a contest in the nursing department to name the camp," said Michelle Slafkosky, the camp's co-founder — with former colleague Deborah Mello — and the hospital's manager of volunteer services. "Since we want students to see all the careers in a hospital, we didn't want it to sound like a nursing camp."

Like the rest of her peers at last Tuesday's intensive CPR training, 15-year-old Rebecca Rose, a home-schooled sophomore from Baltimore, was dressed in a blue scrub top and beige khaki pants — attire similar to what health care professionals wear everyday on the job.

Rose's aunt and uncle work as a pediatric nurse and an anesthesiologist, respectively. Growing up around them inspired her to consider a career in health care. But Camp ECHO, she said, also opened her eyes to some of what she considers the more gruesome realities of the profession.

"The O.R. is cool, but I don't think I want to work there," said Rose while taking a short break from her CPR training. "I can't deal with all the blood. It's just not for me." She enjoyed visiting the orthopedic floor during another group tour of the hospital, she said.



Instructor Vonda Barber, above, explains the proper way to do CPR as high school students at Camp ECHO practice on dummies. At left, Shannon Cummins, 17, of Arundel High School practices using a mask.

said Hall, adding that participants can choose not to witness a live birth, view in-progress knee surgeries or visit the morgue — activities offered at past camps. Hall prepares the curriculum, arranges hospital tours and chooses guest presenters such as Vonda Barber, last Tuesday's CPR instructor from Health Quest Inc.

"I use the same lessons with these high schoolers that I use with adults," said Barber between drills, which involved performing procedures on a T-shirted rubber dummy. Campers learned how to properly pump its chest, perform mouth-to-mouth and check for consciousness by shaking its shoulders and shouting, "Are you OK?" using real-life scenarios.

"What's the first thing you need to do when deciding whether to do CPR on someone?" Barber asked the group during one of their drills. Although they gave the correct answer — to check that "the scene is safe" — they sounded like whispering angels, and needed to be told by Nyuma Harrison, an ER nurse at St. Agnes and program volunteer, to speak up.

"You have to say it!" said Harrison from the side of the room. Harrison teaches clinical skills courses at the Catholic University of America in Washington and brought her lesson plan to the campers last Friday.

"You usually hear kids say they want to be a surgeon or a pediatrician because that's what they see on TV," said Harrison. "It was good for them to see the food service area where we prepare patients' meals. Every job at a hospital is important."

Since 2004, 43 students have completed the program. Slafkosky said she plans to contact past campers to see how many chose the health care profession, one of few industries still thriving since the recession hit in late 2007.

"It was very beneficial for me," said Jones, who plans to return to school for a second degree in nursing.

For Sade Handy, 15, nursing seems to run in the family. "Some of my aunts are nurses," said Handy, a sophomore at Reach Partnership in Baltimore. "I like being in the camp. It's fun going to the different units, learning different things. I haven't seen anything that I don't like or that isn't interesting."

Shannon Cummins' mother is a cardiac nurse at St. Agnes. The 17-year-old Arundel High School senior is seriously considering becoming an emergency room nurse. "I like the idea of caring for people I don't even know, and just helping people," Cummins said.

Many of this year's participants have yet to declare a college major, but the program's directors and volunteers said one of the goals is to lure students into the health care field early by showing them the rewards and challenges of working on behalf of others — and to steer some toward a different profession better suited to their talents and interests.

"We had one student who saw the O.R. room and decided she never wanted to step foot in there again," said Joyce Hall with a chuckle. A longtime registered nurse and the hospital's patient relations coordinator, Hall has worked with the camp since 2004 and now coordinates the program with Slafkosky. "That student went on to become a social worker.

"Everything we do here is optional,"

CARE VALUES by Angela J. Bass

I received a press release directly from a PR group about this health care camp for high school students. After tackling several tough stories, this one was a welcome change of pace. I was able to attend one of the camp days (CPR training day) at Saint Agnes Hospital and meet the instructors and participants. My greatest challenge was trying to encourage the seven female campers, all in their mid-teens, not to feel shy about talking to a newspaper reporter, as they took a while to come around and really start answering my questions. I also had the chance to take photos, though the staff photographer's photos were the only ones published. Still, it was a great experience being able to consider the visual elements of my story and to try capturing that on location. The article was fun to write, and was probably my most quickly written feature (reported and written in a span of three days), so I'm most proud of that, being that I come from a long form magazine writing background.

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