

STONY BROOK

Reflections of HOPE

Health care partnership lets minority students be mentored by professionals

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Physical therapist Ushinde Payne was once asked who had been his favorite Black male teacher and he realized that in his more than 20 years of school, he had had only one.

“That kind of blew me away because I had never really thought about it,” said Payne, who is Black. Now, as a mentor in a Stony Brook high school program that aims to address racial disparities in health care professions, Payne, 41, said he takes his role seriously.

“The messenger sometimes really does matter,” he said. “Perhaps my message hits these kids differently than the same message from one of my co-workers.”

The Health Occupations Partnership for Excellence (HOPE) program is a joint venture between Stony Brook University Hospital and the Brentwood, Longwood and Wyandanch school districts. The program, now in its 16th year, strives to increase the number of health care providers from under-served and underrepresented racial and ethnic minority backgrounds by having juniors and seniors meet with medical professionals across a spectrum of fields, many of whom are people of color.

Statistics show that Blacks and Latinos make up less than 25% of almost all health care professionals in the United States.

“Part of the reason young people of color are not going into health care is that they’re not seeing it as an option because they’re not seeing enough people who look like them in these roles,” said Yvonne Spreckels, the director of community relations for Stony Brook who runs the program.

Applicants to the two-year



HOPE students, from left: Samantha Baker; Alanis Idrovo; Mia Wattlely; Hannah Ehlich; Isabelle Valot; Meagan Roderick; Danyela Celan; Jeffrey Torres; and Ryan Marquez. ■ Video: newsday.com/longisland

UNBALANCED NUMBERS

Healthcare Professions by Race and Ethnicity in 2020

Profession	White	Asian	Black	Hispanic/Latino
Surgeons	82.4%	13.4%	4.2%	15.6%
Dentists	78.8%	16.6%	1.4%	5.5%
Registered Nurses	75.3%	8.7%	13.4%	7.9%
Physician Assistants	79.9%	12.3%	6.3%	7.9%
Physical Therapists	77.8%	15%	5.2%	4.4%

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

program must have at least a 2.5 GPA and provide letters of recommendation, among other requirements.

Participants don’t have to be students of color but the majority are, Spreckels said. So far, 180 students have graduated from the program.

The teens have in-depth conversations with medical professionals and get to shadow them, while also learning about the inner workings of the hospital. The program exposes the students to a wide range of medical professions beyond doctors and nurses, including laboratory technicians, respiratory

therapists and pharmacists.

COVID-19 has hampered much of the in-person experience, but mentoring has continued via Zoom.

“It’s not ideal,” Spreckels said. “They’re not in the labs touching things, but they’re still getting the information and the opportunity to ask questions.”

The program also provides juniors with SAT preparation and assists seniors with college applications.

Dr. Ana Costa, 43, an anesthesiologist and mentor, said first-generation college students like herself are especially in

need of this support. “My parents didn’t really have any means to show us what paths to follow and what was achievable for us,” Costa said.

One of the program’s success stories is Escarleth Ponce Fuentes, 23, who graduated from Wyandanch High School in 2016. She is now a nurse at Stony Brook and hopes to become a mentor.

HOPE was inspiring, she said, and taught her that “you’re in control of your own destiny.”

There are 35 students currently enrolled, including Jeffrey Torres, 18, of Brentwood. Torres said he may become a surgeon but that HOPE has made him “think about all my options.”

Rosa Melendez, 16, of Wyandanch, said she wants to go into child psychology but that HOPE is giving her an inside perspective into research and other areas of science.

“To have more people that look like me, have the same background as me, doing stuff like that and being able to hear and see what they’re doing is incredible, and it makes me even more excited to go to college,” Melendez said.

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