

A STEP AHEAD

Intern program helping shape future for students, local businesses

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Intern Makalah Smith, left, takes notes for cardiac rehab manager Allan Lewis, center, as he puts patient Richard Sullivan through a six-minute walking test in CHI Memorial Hospital's cardiac rehabilitation facility recently. More than 40 businesses and organizations in Hamilton County have offered paid internships to high school students through the Step-Up Chattanooga program.

Makalah Smith

said she's learning more over the summer than she would from years of sitting in a classroom.

On Thursday alone, Smith, a junior at East Hamilton School, learned how to use a dual stethoscope and worked with cardio rehab patients. This summer, she's also been able to observe surgeries and work in nursing administration at CHI Memorial Hospital.

Smith said she's known for a while she wants to be a doctor or nurse, and working in the hospital this summer is helping prepare her for that future.

"I'm seeing the whole medical experience from a different side," she said. "From the inside."

Smith is one of 84 Step-Up Chattanooga interns working this summer at more than 40 businesses and organizations across Hamilton County. Two are working at the Chattanooga Times Free Press.

Step-Up Chattanooga was launched earlier this spring by the Public Education Foundation and the Hamilton County Department of Education.

The aim is to get low-income juniors and seniors into paid internships designed to train and connect them with employers.

Jeff Rector, business partner manager for Step-Up Chattanooga, said the program allows students to network with

people outside of their social circle and develop soft skills needed in the job market.

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— JEFF RECTOR,
BUSINESS PARTNER
MANAGER
FOR STEP-UP
CHATTANOOGA

"The gist of this program is to give [students] experience and information they typically wouldn't have the opportunity to get," Rector said. "There are enough hurdles for students this age, but for this low-income group, there seems to be some more hurdles we are hoping to help them take out of the way."

A Boston-based internet company has said Hamilton County residents don't have the training and education to fill about 15,000 available local jobs, and that number is expected to increase.

Data show 65 percent of Hamilton County Schools graduates fail to earn any education past high school, leaving them unqualified for most livable-wage jobs coming to the area. Step-Up is hoping to develop a more skilled workforce prepared to fill the plentiful jobs arriving in Hamilton County, many in sectors like advanced manufacturing.

The \$500,000 initiative is modeled after Step-Up Minneapolis, which connected 21,000 students with employers over a decade. Ninety-six percent of those supervisors reported their students made valuable contributions to their companies' workplaces.

The program here, endorsed by Chattanooga Mayor Andy Berke and Hamilton County Mayor Jim Coppinger, is being funded for two years by BlueCross BlueShield of Tennessee and the Benwood Foundation.

Next year, Rector said, Step-Up Chattanooga wants to double the number of interns and add more employers to offer students a variety of opportunities that match their interests.

To participate, students had to be recommended by their high school counselor and qualify for free or reduced-priced lunch at school.

Chosen students went through basic job training and a mock-interview process, preparing them to work in a professional setting and navigate the unspoken rules and expectations of corporate culture. The prospective interns interviewed with companies and nonprofits. The vast majority were offered jobs, and started bringing home paychecks for



Brittany O'Dell, right, works with Alivia Ennis recently at the Creative Discovery Museum. O'Dell is working an internship through the Step-Up program.

work more advanced than answering phones and fetching coffee.

Charmichael Jefferson said working at Chattanooga Gas Co. introduced him to what he said could become a career.

Jefferson graduated this spring from Brainerd High School and plans to attend Tennessee State University this fall to study biotechnology. Dressed in a bow tie and gray slacks at the company's office Wednesday, Jefferson said he's gained valuable work experience and an understanding of the natural gas industry.

Before this internship, he said, his work experience was limited to fast food. He's thankful Step-Up offered him training.

"At first I was kind of nervous," he said. "The mock interview helped me, though. They told me I was good at eye contact and saying what I was thinking, but told me I talked way too fast."

Jefferson said he feels more prepared for his next job interview, and will be proud to boast about his experience and accomplishments at Chattanooga Gas.

"The experience is more valuable than the money for me," he said. "But the money isn't bad either."

Chattanooga Gas operations supervisor Jonathan Vreeland said having Jefferson also benefits the company.

"It gives us the opportunity to get new talent," he said. "We want to keep people like [Jefferson], talented and young, in the area."

Vreeland said Jefferson is held to the same expectations as any other employee. He has worked in a variety of roles, doing everything from projects in the office to assisting field specialists. He hopes seeing different job opportunities at Chattanooga Gas will help Jefferson, and future interns, decide on a future with the company.

Across town at the Creative Discovery Museum, Brittany O'Dell is working in the museum's Make It area, where she helps kids with sewing and wood-working projects.

"I'm pretty creative," O'Dell said. "This is a great fit."

O'Dell will be a senior at Soddy-Daisy High School this fall and is glad to be making money to help pay the cost of submitting college applications and test scores.

She said she's learned a lot this summer about having patience with kids and the expectations that come with holding a job.

"It's way different than school, where missing a day isn't that big of a deal," she said. "Here I've never missed a day."

Several of O'Dell's friends, including her twin sister, are participating in Step-Up this summer, and all have different internships downtown.

"It's kind of cool," O'Dell said. "We use to hang out and talk about school, and now

when we're together we talk about work."

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