

SUMMER OPPORTUNITIES – IT’S NOT TOO EARLY TO START

by Gerry Khermouch

More than 300 parents turned out for the December PA meeting with summer on their minds – that is, finding a productive role for their kids in those long off-months from their academic pursuits. For many that means finding an elusive internship that will allow their child to grow, even while perhaps making a little money. They were rewarded with a slew of practical advice, from specific internships worth pursuing to strategies for pursuing them and cautionary words about ways one can go off the tracks. The speakers were Research Coordinator Dr. Jonathan Gastel, Parent Coordinator Harvey Blumm and Jennifer Suri, Assistant Principal of the Social Studies department, who also ran through a number of summer opportunities in the humanities, many of them posted on the department’s Web page.

So what are these coveted internships? Parent coordinator Blumm noted that “internship” is just a fancy name for a part-time temporary job – usually unpaid – with a business, non-profit organization, politician, museum, or other group. Why do that, rather than spend summer lounging on a beach? For the exposure internships provide to the real world, Blumm argued. Though outstanding in school, students likely have few clues as to how to act in an adult world – even to the point of being unaware that corporate etiquette calls for not showing up to the interview wearing a backwards baseball cap (“it happens time and again,” he noted). An internship also allows students to start building a network of contacts that will serve them well in college and their professional careers. In the college application process, an interesting set of extracurriculars, including internships, allows a student to stand out from others who similarly boast a high GPA and great teacher recommendations. Not least, an activity like shadowing a doctor in an emergency room “can be a way of test-driving a career” – and valuable even if the child hates the experience, because then “they can cross that one off their list,” Blumm said.

Dr. Gastel, the Research Coordinator, pointed to other benefits. Internships help students develop a sense of independence. They can be a way of integrating their studies with outside work. They often provide an outlet for greater creativity than is available within the confines of their academic work.

To locate promising opportunities, parents and students should not hesitate to draw upon their personal networks of family, friends, neighbors and church. Stuy families often are in a position to exploit career development centers operated by universities and colleges. Those are generally closed to outsiders, but “if you have a child, cousin or alumnus with access to an internship center, that’s like a gold mine,” Blumm exhorted.

Families also should make use of the wide array of resources available from Stuy itself: its guidance counselors, teachers and assistant principals; postings on the wall outside Room 236; and Parent Coordinator Harvey Blumm (Room 273), who maintains an informal network in most fields and institutions in the City. Already rich in information, the Stuy Web site has been undertaking a further upgrading, with plans to offer a compilation of internships and other activities at the “Parent Tools” link this winter.

Though a diverse, cosmopolitan city like New York is naturally rich in opportunities, being a member of the Stuy community in itself

can open doors, both because of the school’s outsized reputation and because Stuy parents themselves often are well-connected. Blumm noted that three local judges have allowed students to work in their chambers, while a Stuy parent has taken three or four kids in at an emergency room he runs. At last count, he said, 14 Stuy parents are scientists who work in research labs and have taken in kids during the summer. At least eight chapters of engineering associations are located in the City, and while most of their internships are geared to college students, “you’d be amazed how often they bend the rules and take a child from Stuyvesant,” he said.

The wide range of possibilities means certain questions should be addressed early. Does your child want something integrated in some way with school activities or something independent of those? Is he or she seeking a structured activity, such as a math camp, or a more independent activity, perhaps a volunteer assignment at a local organization?

The internships “should reflect who they are, what they are interested in, what their talents are,” Blumm warned. “Don’t push them to work in a hospital because you want them to be a doctor – if it’s not what they want, they’re not going to do well.” That’s frequently borne out by the feedback he gets from students who spent their summer pursuing an assignment that was pushed on them by their parents.

With snow on the ground, summer may seem a long way off (though the large turnout that evening suggested that at least a portion of Stuy families is already thinking of summer). The speakers urged parents to start focusing on the search right away – indeed, a few application deadlines closed December 31 and many of the more desirable spots will soon start to go. “Kids who wait until April or May – as my kids did – will get nada, zilch,” Blumm warned. “This is one thing where you do have to push them.”

Among the practical bits of advice offered by the speakers, Assistant Principal Suri cautioned that college-based programs can be fine, but will have no bearing on whether your child will be accepted by that college. Blumm echoed that thought, noting that invitations to activities like a national congressional youth forum can tap your child into an excellent program, but almost invariably will be very expensive. “My advice is, if it’s a topic your child really loves, by all means do it – but it’s not going to be of any more value than something they do locally or a hands-on activity,” he said. Parents should always ask for Stuy families as references for summer programs they are considering, particularly paid programs or those held in overseas locations, Suri urged. Blumm noted that almost any internship will require students to have a resume; for help on that, they are welcome to e-mail him to request a template that can be converted to a resume in just 15 or 20 minutes.

While students ideally find a summer activity that taps into their academic interests while also giving them an inkling about how the real world works, circumstances may dictate that they sacrifice the intellectual appeal in favor of a basic paying job. Blumm assured his listeners that this won’t diminish their appeal to college admissions officers. “There’s nothing wrong with saying you had to work a boring job in junior year because you needed money to save up for college.”

