

THOUSAND OAKS SURGICAL HOSPITAL

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High school students get early exposure to medicine

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LEARNING ON LOCATION—Dr. Kyle Himsl explains a procedure to Oaks Christian graduate Christian Nielson. Christian shadowed the surgeon on July 27 at Thousand Oaks Surgical Hospital as part of the Gene Black Summer Medical Program. **RICHARD GILLARD/Acorn Newspapers** Blake Barr tried to prepare himself for a series of operations he'd be observing in the morning. The 17-year-old was dreading the trip to Thousand Oaks Surgical Hospital.

“I was so scared about (watching). I thought, am I going to throw up or faint going into surgery?” said Blake, who will be a senior at Newbury Park High School.

The visit was part of the Los Angeles Pediatric Society's Gene Black Summer Medical Career Program. Every year, about 55 11th- and 12th-grade students in Ventura, Los Angeles and San Bernardino counties are selected to shadow doctors and nurses in medical facilities for up to a month.

Blake had applied to the program in the spring because he was interested in the healthcare field and had considered becoming a pharmacist like his grandfather and his aunt. But after witnessing a nearly two hour ACL replacement, in which surgeons cut open a patient's knee and inserted a tiny camera, he began to think about a new path.

“I was glued to the (scene). I quickly found that orthopedic surgery interests me. I latched onto that,” said Blake, who is now planning to become an orthopedic surgeon.

After participating in the two- week Combined Valley Program with 11 other students, Blake—who hopes to earn his undergraduate degree at UCLA, UC San Diego or UC Berkeley— said he's more confident about his education and career decisions.

“I wasn't entirely sure I wanted to go to medical school,” he said. “Now I know I want to. It's a great way to test the various careers and paths you can take on the medical route. You find out a lot about yourself.”

Another program participant and NPHS student, Ashley Tarkiainen, 17, said the exposure expanded her interest in the medical field.

“Emergency room surgeons are calm and do a good job of not letting anything bring them down. I couldn’t see myself in the ER before. This changed my mind,” said Ashley, who is also interested in orthopedic surgery.

And she’s taken the opportunity to ask doctors personal questions.

“I’ve asked what it’s like to raise a family with the (long) hours, how flexible their schedules are,” said the Camarillo resident.

Dr. Alvin Miller, who along with Dr. Katherine Galos coordinates student visits to Thousand Oaks Surgical Hospital, Los Robles Hospital and Medical Center and Simi Valley Hospital, said the program is highly competitive. He and Galos chose 12 students from a pool of about 40 highly qualified applicants for the local Valley sessions.

“It’s heartbreaking to deny a good student who is interested,” Miller said.

He and Galos favored applications with good grades, extracurricular activities and community service work.

“You don’t want someone who’s not interested in other things too,” said Miller, who’s played violin in two orchestras in Simi Valley and Moorpark and dreamed of becoming a violinist before settling on a career in medicine.

When the medical career program started more than 40 years ago, it was aimed at students from low-income families who might not otherwise have opportunities to get an early education in medicine. Later it opened to all students interested in a healthcare career, Miller, 85, said.

In 2008, as the program became difficult to maintain because of patient privacy laws, Miller was asked to introduce it to local hospitals.

“Helping young people get started in their careers is something that I can do because I’ve been doing medicine for a long time. You get to a point where you’d like to give some of what you learned away,” said Miller, a pediatrician and neonatologist for 56 years at Kaiser Permanente Medical Center in Panorama City, where he established the neonatal intensive care unit. He now has a private practice in Thousand Oaks.

“ It’s a very concentrated two weeks . . . These kids have seen major surgeries, Cesareans, brain surgery, people dying, convulsions,” he said.

A student in one of last year’s summer sessions wrote to him after the program was over to say she was dropping her plan to become a doctor.

“Better she found that out when she was a high school senior than a few years down the road after she’s spent all that money on her education,” he said.

“But most (participants) solidify their interest,” he said, adding that many doctors who’ve mentored students during hospital rounds themselves participated in the program when they were in high school.

Blake said shadowing doctors eight hours a day was mind opening.

“It really made me appreciate how lucky I am. There are people born with serious medical issues,” Blake said.

“I learned how important the profession of a doctor is. They touch lives every day. It’s inspirational.”