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*Shelby Storrie assisting Dr. Teelah Grand
photo by Chris Fritchie*



Jumpstart on a Career

By DeAnn Daley Holcomb

SHELBY STORRIE knew she wanted to enter veterinary medicine but wasn't sure what direction she wanted to take. A junior at Liberty High School in Frisco, Shelby decided to apply for the Independent Study Mentorship (ISM), a program Shelby felt would help her discover more about her chosen field and offer hands-on experience. Provided through the Frisco Independent School District (FISD), the ISM program is designed for academically advanced junior and senior students to help them focus on a career path they may want to pursue in college and beyond.

"I knew I wanted to do something with animals but I wasn't sure exactly

what because there are so many different aspects of veterinary medicine," Shelby said. "You can be a veterinarian, a technician or a cardiologist. There are so many aspects of this career and I wanted to find out what area I liked best."

ISM is a carefully crafted program that allows students the opportunity to work with professionals in a field they are considering as their career from medicine, civil engineering and journalism to many others.

Frisco High School teacher Laura Simpson designed the ISM program after researching similar programs in different districts and incorporated it into the Frisco ISD curriculum seven years ago.

"It gives students an opportunity to get out and work with professionals," Mrs. Simpson said. "Students benefit at many levels and part of it is building their self esteem and developing the confidence to speak with an adult without fear. But most importantly, ISM gives them the opportunity to make sure this is the career they want to pursue. Basically they are getting a jump start on their careers and networking skills that usually begin in college."

ISM program is designed for academically advanced junior and senior students to help them focus on a career path.

Students interested in ISM must go through a selection process. Once chosen to participate, a student will select topics of study they are passionate about or interested in pursuing as a career.

Mrs. Simpson is one of three ISM teachers working with students at the four Frisco high schools. As part of the ISM classroom curriculum, Mrs. Simpson teaches life skills such as management, communication, interpersonal skills, interviewing, goal setting and of course, time management. Part of the classroom work requires extensive background research on their chosen topic or career and then the student will seek out mentors in that field.

"It was difficult to call, make an appointment and talk about what I wanted to do. After interviewing with five vets I accepted a position with Dr. Teelah Grand at the Animal Care Center at Stonebridge Ranch," Shelby said. "This year I am doing veterinary medicine with house pets and next year I will be working

with a zoo veterinarian in the more exotic species of animals because I love wild animals. That way I will experience a mentor in both fields and see the good and bad about both instead of going to college and finding out my junior year this is not the career I want.”

Students are encouraged to interview as many as five professionals. Once they decide on a mentor, one of the Frisco ISM teachers will contact the mentor and set up the program between the student and mentor that includes first-hand observations of the mentor at work along with hands-on experience.

“Certainly the hands-on experience the students get at the elbow of a mentor is so important,” said Julie Martin, the ISM teacher at Liberty and Wakeland High Schools in Frisco. “They also develop a relationship with a mentor, networking skills and make connections.”

Learning how to network helped Eric Sivado, a senior at Frisco High School, enter local and state competitions in his career field of computer animation. Eric’s mentor is Collin College Professor Marshall Pitman. Hard at work daily on his computer, Eric hopes to eventually work in the computer animation field of the entertainment industry or with a production company.

“It started out as a hobby and I wanted to see if I could find someone who worked in the field so I could find out what it was like and if it was an area I want to pursue when I get to college,” Eric said. “I go to Collin College every Thursday and I usually bring in projects, like the competition for the Texas Computer Educator’s Association, and Mr. Pitman will look at it and help me find ways to make it better.”

The fall semester requires students to develop a research portfolio surrounding their career choice or topic that includes resources such as articles, surveys and



Laura Simpson & Eric Sivado (top);
Kristina Manser & Beth Robinson (bottom)

photos by Chris Fritchie

Internet research. From there students begin contacting and setting up interviews with potential mentors. Once a mentor is chosen, students set up the weekly off-campus visits with their mentor, with required permission from parents, along with weekly classroom time that involves working closely with their teacher.

“To me the hardest part was contacting people I didn’t know, trying to explain what I am hoping to accomplish,” Eric said.

Part of the curriculum required by ISM students includes providing a mission statement, a resume and topic proposal.

“I would call us ‘facilitators’ instead of ‘teachers’ because we oversee their research and preparation and, at

whatever point they seek out a mentor, we help show them how to locate a mentor in their area of interest. We monitor a student’s progress and constantly communicate with the mentor,” said Di Ann Hill, the ISM teacher at Centennial High School in Frisco. “In the classroom we work with them on their speech presentations that are a requirement of the program.”

While research of the student’s topic or career choice continues throughout the year, it is especially emphasized in the first part of the program.

“If a student has an area they are passionate about, this provides them with an opportunity to learn as much as they can at whatever pace they want,” Mrs. Martin said. “It can be anything from chemistry to journalism. It can also be a passion like music, so we have doctors, lawyers, architects and then we have musicians or artists.”

Kristina Manser is a senior in the ISM program at Centennial High School. Originally focused on a marketing career, her teacher, Mrs. Hill, advised her to pursue an internship at Frisco *STYLE Magazine* because of her interest in writing. Kristina interviewed with Frisco *STYLE Magazine* Editor

Beth Robinson and was offered the opportunity to become an intern at the magazine.

“Since I started I have gained a lot of experience,” Kristina said. “I have written an article for the magazine and my whole experience is being catalogued in my ISM portfolio. Looking ahead I would love to find a position that allows me to be involved in both areas – marketing and journalism. Luckily, most marketing careers allow for writing and creativity and I might have just found the best of both worlds thanks to ISM.”

The spring semester requires creating a product with a real-world application. The emphasis may center on the overall process as much as the product.



ISM teachers Laura Simpson, Di Ann Hill and Julie Martin
photos by Chris Fritchie

potential mentor told the student that about 80 percent of his job is paperwork. That sealed it for him,” Mrs. Simpson said. “He did not want to be a lawyer.”

After seven years the ISM program has been able to experience the cycle of having students take the program, go on to college, graduate and are now working in their chosen career. Mrs. Simpson said it is exciting to hear from past students through

“This six weeks they are giving a ‘how to’ presentation about their research and by the end of the year they will demonstrate what they are doing through a 45-minute presentation to their mentors and an invited audience,” Mrs. Simpson said.

Centennial High School senior Sloane Skipper wants to become a doctor. The ISM program helped Sloane discover the direction she wanted to take in the field of medicine. Last year she observed, shadowed and assisted her mentor, a local obstetrician and gynecologist. Although Sloane said it was a wonderful experience, she found it wasn’t the field of medicine she wanted.

“I think I want to go into emergency medicine and this year working at the Centennial Family Medical Center I am able to see a variety of different aspects of medicine,” Sloane said. “Working in family medicine I am learning about everything from diabetes to Alzheimer’s, high blood pressure, ordinary illnesses, there is so much to learn.”

Sloane visits weekly with her mentor, Dr. Scott Newman.

“They take the time to sit down and talk to me about certain subjects like diabetes and they give me homework. I

have to research a disease or a technique that is used and then I brief them on what I have discovered. I also get the chance to observe with patients,” Sloane said. “It has helped me so much because now I know what I want to do and some of the sacrifices I am going to have to make.”

While the ISM program not only jump starts a student’s future plans involving college and a career, one of the key features of the program helps students identify how they can pursue their passion.

“It can save thousands of dollars for parents as it prevents students from starting over in the middle of college, because through ISM they found out early they didn’t enjoy the career they had originally chosen,” Mrs. Hill said. “Sometimes we have students come back and say, ‘this isn’t for me,’ and to us that is a success, not a failure.”

One of Mrs. Simpson’s students was convinced he wanted to be an attorney until he spent the day interviewing a potential mentor.

“All my student could visualize was what happens on the television show *Law and Order*. He came back from interviewing an attorney knowing absolutely that he did not want to be a lawyer after the

e-mail or phone calls, updating them on what they are doing now.

“Eric’s older brother is getting a degree in civil engineering and he still comes back to Frisco and works during the summer for the mentor he had when he was in high school in the ISM program,” Mrs. Simpson said. “Just the other day I received an e-mail from one of my students who had worked with Tim Heller, the meteorologist at Fox 4 News, and he went on to get his meteorology degree. He wanted me to know that ISM helped him be ahead of the game. Today he is working for the Oklahoma Department of Environmental Quality.”

Mrs. Simpson said the more she hears from former students, sharing their stories of a successful transition from high school to college and the benefits from being a part of ISM, the more she is convinced they are on the right track.

“It is an opportunity to get out and get exposed to the real world and work with professionals and learn how to deal with what is out there. Hopefully we are giving them the right tools to do this,” Mrs. Simpson said.

DeAnn Daley Holcomb is a freelance writer living in Plano.