

Student Presentation  
Audrey Zahlis

Good evening. My name is Audrey Zahlis, and I am a senior at Hammond High School. As a junior last year, I enrolled in the county's Gifted and Talented Research Program. My sister had participated in the program a few years prior and really enjoyed it, so I thought I might like it as well. The program has two class offerings: the GT Independent Research class and the GT Intern Mentor Program. Usually, the underclassmen take the Independent Research class and the seniors take the Intern Mentor program because for the mentor program, the students have to be able to drive off campus to their internship site for five hours per week. Both classes are very similar; they have the same research base; the main difference is that the mentor students go to a site for a hands-on experience. I have been in both classes and highly recommend students apply for the Independent Research class first and then go into the Intern Mentor Program the year after because they really build on one another. Let me share my experiences with you.

In the G/T Research Program, students are able to choose a topic of their choice. It could be a field for which they have a passion, an issue they wish to address or a field of study that they think they want to major in when they go on to college. In the program, we learn how to conduct scholarly research, which includes learning how to read college level and professional materials. We learn the various methodologies researchers use to solve problems, and we conduct our own data collection to generate our own "original" research. Eventually we compile all of it together in a synthesis paper and a product that we share with an authentic audience. I enrolled in the Independent Research class first. At the time, I was 100% focused on becoming an event planner, and I was already interested in the "green movement," so I decided to study green weddings. In the Independent Research and Intern Mentor classes, we are assigned to find two scholarly sources every week; cite them and annotate them. This begins the basis of our research. After a few weeks, however, I ran into a wall. There was simply not enough information on such a new topic. I had secured a project advisor, someone who was a professional in the field that I could contact through emails and phone calls to help me during my research and verify some of my assignments. But my advisor didn't have much experience in "green" event planning because it is such a new movement. However, while researching, I came across a tip for brides and grooms trying to reduce their wedding's carbon footprint. They were advised to remove Styrofoam from their event. So, I did a quick search and came across one startling fact about Styrofoam that crystallized my topic for the year and significantly changed my view on how and what we recycle. The interesting fact was that in New York City public schools alone, 850,000 Styrofoam lunch trays are used and disposed daily. When stacked up that is 2 miles high, or 8.5 times the size of the Empire State Building—daily! I was appalled, but also very intrigued; after all, we eat our lunches on Styrofoam trays here in Howard County. I began researching Styrofoam a little more and started to understand its negative impact on our environment. It's a possible human carcinogen; it never biodegrades, and therefore, sits in our landfills forever. It's so lightweight it blows from our landfills where it sits, flies into the water bodies where it is broken into smaller pieces, and animals consume it and die. We pretend it can be recycled because of that little triangle on the bottom of it, but in truth it cannot be 100% recycled. Not only that, but other alternatives such as burning it, releases over 57 chemicals into the air. The problem is that it's cheap, and therefore very appealing. After some research, I decided to focus on studying the effects of Styrofoam on the environment, humans and animals and specifically how we can get it out of Howard County schools. One of our assignments was to conduct and transcribe an interview with a professional in our field of research. My family was going to California to visit my grandmother, and there was a company, Earth Resource Foundation, which focused on eradicating Styrofoam, and so I contacted them. I convinced my parents to rent a car and drive me to the business so that I could interview the people there and learn how I could use their work to help me with my research investigation here on the east coast. I did it! I found that one topic about which I was truly passionate. After that, the class became even more enjoyable. I grew as a writer because of assignments that challenged me and made me write using a professional style and tone. My research skills improved, and I did not fear that word "research" so much. Even more importantly, I learned real life experiences that will help me in the future. I learned how to contact businesses and conduct professional interviews. Most importantly, I learned confidence, contacting companies I would have previously been intimidated to contact let alone visit. As well, I scheduled a meeting and met with the head of Food and Nutrition for Howard County Public Schools in hopes of banning Styrofoam and switching to a better alternative of compostable lunch trays. My research had such an impact at my school that I was chosen to present it at the Howard County Student Learning Conference last year. This conference is student run and is the culminating event for the GT Research program. Additionally, though I wasn't able to ban Styrofoam from Howard County Public Schools last year, I have not quit my cause. This year I enrolled in the Intern Mentor program and couldn't be happier. My mentor is Kristin Johnson, the event coordinator for the Ulman Cancer Fund for Young Adults. It's the perfect internship for me because I am working to combine the green movement with event planning and helping the Ulman Cancer Fund for Young Adults leave a much smaller carbon footprint. From my internship, I am gaining marketing, organizational, and networking skills along with learning how to work with adults in a professional setting. As well, my mentor has networked and put me in contact with the Vice-President of E-Structors who is helping me to continue my research from last year on banning Styrofoam products from Howard County Public Schools.

I would highly recommend that each of you here today encourage your students to look into applying to the Gifted and Talented Research Program at your student's school. It is a program that helps us to better clarify our interests, sets us apart from other students when we are applying to college, and it is that one class that teaches us skills we can apply in all aspects and disciplines of our life. Thank you.