

Role of cancer researchers revealed

UOttawa student receives national recognition for interactive high school student lab tour

Ottawa-area Grade 11 and 12 students are now getting an in-depth look at the role of cancer researchers thanks to a lab tour of the Ottawa Hospital Research Institute Cancer Centre, developed by University of Ottawa Master's in biochemistry student Natalie Andrews.

More than 250 students have already visited the labs for interactive and informative tours, which involve them in hands-on activities based on the science performed by the centre's researchers.

Andrews, a 23-year-old volunteer with Let's Talk Science, a national, charitable science outreach organization that aims to turn kids on to science, has recently been recognized with the 2010 Let's Talk Science CIHR-Synapse Award for developing a successful and innovative health-related activity.

The lab tour was designed with the goal of providing students with opportunities Andrews says she would have cherished as a high school student.

"It wasn't until university that I discovered what biochemical research actually entailed," says Andrews. "I figured, why just talk about my research when I could show these students what it's like to work in a cancer research lab, what it's like to be a graduate student and why I find it so interesting and rewarding."

During the tour, students learn about cancer, the research performed at the cancer centre and different methods of treatment. They then rotate through three stations, where they get to try hands-on activities including loading and viewing DNA electrophoresis gels, observing live cancers cells through a microscope and collecting protein from those cells. They also get to learn about the transmission of viruses, as there is a research group at the cancer centre that studies HIV/AIDS.

"I know that the students are appreciative of the insight that graduate students can offer; a group once applauded the volunteers without even being prompted to do so. A reaction like that just makes your day," says Andrews.

According to Barbara Vanderhyden, PhD, Let's Talk Science director at the University of Ottawa, Andrews' lab tour has increased the request for similar tours for groups such as the Rotary Club and breast cancer patients. "While her contributions and effort to organize these tours is nothing short of phenomenal, it is the impact that she is having on both her colleagues and the high school students that is most inspirational," says Vanderhyden.

Andrews is thrilled to see the success of her initiative and hopes her story will inspire other graduate students to undertake similar ventures in an effort to better prepare and educate future scientists. "If there is a topic you are truly passionate about and feel that it's not mainstream enough, that students could share your excitement and benefit from learning about it, then do it!"

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