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Top skills prime teens for top jobs

By Ann Doss Helms

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Devante Bledsoe, an Independence High senior, was recruited by Massachusetts Institute of Technology but chose Columbia University, which is giving him a full scholarship in chemical engineering.

Myers Park's Emily Hudson, who logged a perfect SAT score in math, will pursue engineering and physics at Washington and Lee.

Athidi Guthikonda, who loves Science Olympiad so much she took it to local elementary schools, will head to Duke on her way to becoming a cardiologist.

As America strives to boost its supply of scientists, engineers and mathematicians, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools' Class of 2010 is doing its part. Graduates such as Athidi, Emily and Devante will step across the stage with significant skills for the best jobs of the 21st century.

And all three have racked up stellar academic records while leading rich lives on other fronts, such as world travel, arts and community service.

That doesn't surprise Superintendent Peter Gorman, a former science teacher: "Our highest performers are more balanced than ever before."

Cindy Moss, CMS's math/science coordinator, says top students generally have something else in common: They caught the bug early and kept developing their talents.

Miracle worker

Athidi (pronounced "atheedee") says her life's course was set when she was 8, and a cardiac surgeon saved her grandmother's life.

"He worked a miracle," Athidi recalls. She made up her mind "to create miracles for other people out there."

She did her first Science Olympiad competition as a sixth-grader in Chicago. In eighth grade the family came to Charlotte, and Athidi was amazed at the strength of the olympiad team at Jay M.

Robinson Middle School. The team placed second in the nation, and Athidi and a partner took first in their category.

Ardrey Kell High brought more opportunities and awards. She worked with a medical Explorers program, led the school's Health Occupation Students of America club and shadowed a cardiologist.

She was so smitten with Science Olympiad that she helped coach the Robinson team once she was too old to participate, and worked with principals to get nearby elementary schools involved.

Because of that, she was almost too busy to respond when someone suggested she enter a pageant. But Athidi, a talented Indian dancer and a quick study, signed up at the last minute. An early success led her to become Charlotte's 2009 Carrousel Queen and the current Miss India North Carolina.

Now she's headed for Duke on a scholarship. She plans to major in some combination of biology, chemistry and psychology, and minor in dance.

Puzzles and plays

Emily is the child of a chemical engineer and a mechanical engineer. She has always loved solving a puzzle, whether it's Sudoku or a math problem.

But theater proved a rival for her passion. She cites Jen Band, her theater coach at Alexander Graham Middle, as her greatest role model. Emily joined Band in acting with Children's Theatre of Charlotte.

Later, when Band left to create a nonprofit that would get artistic teens involved in fund-raising for people with disabilities, Emily was quick to sign on. As a charter member of Playing For Others, Emily has been involved in organizing an annual arts show to raise money for autism, Down syndrome and other causes.

Meanwhile, she excelled in math and science classes at Myers Park High. Last summer she got an engineering internship with Duke Energy, and she saw the real-world value of math.

"It's using math, but it's not just math," she says.

So Emily decided to follow the family tradition and apply for engineering schools. She was accepted to eight of 11 and chose Washington and Lee in Virginia, where she has a full scholarship.

She won't abandon her love of acting: "That's kind of my outlet to be creative."

Research is rewarding

Devante, whose mother works for a health-insurance company, says he's always enjoyed learning in general and math in particular. When he was in third grade at Winterfield Elementary, he and another student were working ahead of their grade in math.

At Independence High, he loved learning calculus from Shelley Matthews. Melissa Bliss, his chemistry teacher, steered him toward Project SEED, a statewide effort to introduce minority and low-income students to chemistry research. He spent last summer studying nanoparticles at UNC Charlotte. This summer he'll go back for more research, looking at using photoreduction of carbon dioxide to create alternative fuels.

The summer after his sophomore year, Devante spent a month in Panama, where he got to know children in an impoverished school as he and other teens built them desks and tables.

Devante's extra work, coupled with excellent grades, paid off. He filed early admission applications to MIT, Columbia and Georgia Tech, and was accepted to all three. Both MIT and Columbia flew him to campus for a weekend to woo him. Columbia got the nod.

Devante knows many find high-tech research intimidating. But he says it's pretty simple: Have a goal, take steps to reach it, and when you mess up, try something new.

"That's with anything in life," he says. "Even science."



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