Finding a jumpstart on the way to a career

Wildlife Leadership Academy sets the bar for Whitehall girl

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Briana Jimenez finds a way to make life pay off.

The senior-to-be at Whitehall High School gave up cheerleading last spring in order to get a part in the school musical, Li'l Abner. It won a Freddy Award, the regional high school equivalent of Broadway's Tony Award.

During last school year, she had discussed her career ambitions with her school counselor. The 17-year-old hopes to become a veterinarian. The counselor suggested she could benefit by applying to the Wildlife Leadership Academy.

And boy, has she. While the program is a year long, there is an intensive one-week field school session that not only kindled Jimenez's desire to become a veterinarian, but fueled it.

"The program was such an eye-opener," she said. "I had no previous idea about any of the information I learned. We learned more in five days than most people will learn in an entire lifetime."

Jimenez took part in the Pennsylvania Bucktails, which focused on whitetail deer.

"They basically taught us about wildlife conservation and what we could do to make a difference," she said.

"They changed my outlook on hunting so much," she said. "Before I came to the program, I was probably one of the most negative people when it came to hunting, but now I can appreciate and understand its necessity as for the conservation and management of our natural resources."

Jimenez and the rest of the students took part in a deer necropsy with Dr. Walt Cottrell, DVM, of the Pa. Game Commission. A necropsy, in over-simplistic terms, is an autopsy on non-human.

"That," she said, "was amazing. I never had the opportunity to look inside any animal because I haven't taken anatomy yet. It was so surreal to look inside a deer and know they were living creatures, and then to understand its makeup. At one stage, I actually got to hold the heart and lungs. I never thought I'd be doing that until medical school."

Jimenez and her group also learned about the circulation system, digestive system and extensive endocrine...
and gland system of deer.

Even after that intensive week studying deer and everything that affects them, Jimenez is not done yet.

"The field school, the week-long part, is just the beginning for the youth," explained Michele Kittel, the WLA director. "At field school, the youth are given the knowledge and tools to become ambassadors for conservation in their home community.

The WLA is a year-long program conducted by the Pennsylvania Institute for Conservation Education through the cooperation of various state agencies and conservation organizations.

"After the field school, the youth are encouraged to complete outreach in their home community in the areas of education, service, media interaction and the creative arts," Kittel continued. "Youth keep a record book of their outreach accomplishments and share it with the Academy director in the November and April after the field school. Youth with the most accomplishments are invited to return to the field school to mentor the new youth, tuition-free."

"We have more than 25 different experts teach throughout the week at the field school, including leading biologists, media professionals and educators. These experts work for various organizations, including Audubon PA, Army Corps of Engineers, Kutztown University, Penn State University, the Pennsylvania Game Commission and Quality Deer Management Association."

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While Jimenez and her group focused on whitetail deer, another group, the Pennsylvania Drummers, focused on Ruffed Grouse. Only 20 students were selected from across the state for the 2011 WLA, and Jimenez was the only one selected from the Lehigh Valley.

While she was the only local student, the staff included Dr. Christopher F. Sacchi, a zoology professor at Kutztown University, and Dr. Chris Farmer, a senior research biologist at Hawk Mountain Sanctuary.

For 2012, the WLA is adding a third group, Pennsylvania Brookies, which will focus on trout.

Jimenez took part in her session at the Stone valley Recreation Area near State College the week of July 5-9.

"We learned about the problems going on with deer," she said. "We learned about its effects on the environment. Browsing is when the deer eat plants and resources they essentially need, but it gets to the point where they overbrowse and actually destroy their own environment, and then their health. You can actually look at the forest and see the destructiveness they are doing.

"One of the problems in the past was that hunters were killing too many bucks and not enough doe. That affects the population significantly. When they reproduce too much, it causes overbrowsing and a lot of conflicts with people, especially on the highways with cars."

The cost of the program is $400, but Jimenez received sponsorship from the Greater Lehigh Valley chapter of QDMA, which offset about half the cost.

"This experience makes me want to pursue a veterinary career even more," she said. "I was worried at the beginning because the instructors were so educated and spoke like they knew the information their whole life. I asked Dr. Cottrell how he knew this information so well, and he said, 'I'm learning every day,' and that he didn't get the hang of it until veterinary school, and that was reassuring."

For more information on WLA you can go online to http://www.piceweb.org/p_WLA.html

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