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Vigo seniors enjoy eye-opening internships

Summer spent in business world led to college changes

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TERRE HAUTE — For Courtney Natt and Kevin Ndife, internships with two local companies last summer proved an eye-opening experience that prompted both to make some changes in their future plans.

Natt, currently a senior at Terre Haute South Vigo High School, had planned to attend the University of Evansville and more than likely, she would have relocated to another community after graduation from college.

But as a result of her paid internship doing marketing at Garmong Construction, she now plans to attend Indiana State University to study pre-optometry and has decided, “I’m probably going to stay here in Terre Haute.”

Ndife, also a South senior, had a paid internship with Joink LLC, an Internet company, where he did data analysis, assisted in software testing, helped with wiring and installing cables and redesigned a website, among other duties.

He had hoped to attend Duke University, but now, he will attend Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology and will study biomedical engineering. He eventually hopes to pursue a medical degree.

While Ndife is not sure whether he would return to Terre Haute to live, “I think it’s a definite possibility.”

Garmong started its internship program seven years ago, and Joink participated for the first time last year. Now, the Vigo County School Corp. is trying to get more businesses involved in the “diversity internship program.” Typically, the program has far more eligible applicants than internship opportunities.

Several businesses attended a breakfast last week hosted by Norm Lowery, president and CEO of First Financial Bank, and Dan Tanoos, VCSC superintendent. Tanoos said he was approached by Lowery and Mel Burks through Terre Haute Tomorrow about ways to encourage a more diverse workforce in the community.

“We had a tremendous outpouring of support from those attending,” Tanoos said. The internships are paid, and students must prepare a résumé and go through an interview process; the company makes the final decision. Typically students, who have just finished their junior year of high school, work 20 hours a week and the internship lasts eight weeks.

The students involved so far have had at least a 3.2 GPA and many have GPAs that are higher, said Carolyn Roberts, VCSC diversity consultant. She and high school principals reach out to students they believe would be good candidates for the program.

Not only are the students strong academically, but they also are involved in community service. Many participate in athletics.

So far, the outreach has been successful. At least eight employers will be involved this summer and several more “are extremely interested,” Tanoos said.

Eight that have committed are Garmong, Joink, First Financial, Hamilton Center, the school district, Sony DADC, Terre Haute Regional Hospital and Ivy Tech.

“We’re excited about it,” Lowery said. The students who participate “are some of our best and brightest. We want to keep them here.”

While one of the goals is more diversity in the workplace, it’s also about “people getting to know each other and respect each other and treat each other as equals and realizing in some regards there is a world out there maybe we haven’t experienced yet,” Lowery said.



The internships help show minority students in Terre Haute that there are opportunities here for them, Roberts said. Then, they might view the community “as a place to stay or come back.”

Ralph Wagle, president of Garmong Construction, started the internship after conversations with Tanoos and Roberts several years ago.

Wagle grew up in Terre Haute and had many close friends who were African American. But when he attended Rose-Hulman, there were no African Americans in his classes at that time, and when he began working in construction, “Most people around me were white males and very seldom was there a female.”

So the idea of a minority internship program emerged.

Too often, minority students haven’t been exposed to opportunities in engineering or construction. “In a lot of instances, they didn’t have the network, relationships or role models that could expose to them what great opportunities there are in these fields,” Wagle said.

Garmong has had good experiences, he said.

The students “are sharp kids and immediately contributed to the success of our company,” he said. They have been involved with marketing and construction.

“It’s been an especially wonderful experience for us. ... I’m really excited to learn other companies will give it a chance. They will find they get a lot more back from the kids than we [employers] give to them,” Wagle said.

Jackie McDonald, implementation coordinator at Joink, said Ndife “had a positive effect on our culture,” she said. “He has an infectious smile” and would ask each day, “What can I do for you?” He was glad to learn anything, she said.

Ndife said he was treated as an equal and not just as an intern. The internship program is important because, “I think it really gives minorities a view of what Terre Haute has to offer,” he said. By making these connections, it will encourage minorities to stay here, which in turn would make Terre Haute “a better, more diverse place.”

Natt described her internship as “an amazing experience” in which she got to see what happens behind-the-scenes with construction projects. She put together PowerPoint presentations showing the Garmong’s past construction projects and also took photos during a grand opening for one project.

Many of her peers want to move away, but the internship opened Natt’s eyes to the opportunities that exist in Terre Haute.

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