Introducing Local High School Students to Aging Research

BY MAJA GAWRONSKA, MA

Summer 2019 was an eventful time for the Stein Institute for Research on Aging and the UC San Diego Center for Healthy Aging. Select local high school students from the neighboring UCSD Preuss School participated in various aging research projects throughout our Center and the UC San Diego School of Medicine. The Stein Institute’s Jackuelin Harris High School Student Training in Aging Research (HS STAR) program is designed for exceptional, underrepresented high school students who are the first in their families to strive to go to college. During the summer, they join our researchers for a chance to learn and practice the daily activities involved in aging research in departments such as Family and Preventive Medicine, Psychiatry, Neurosciences, Orthopedic Surgery, and Bioengineering.

Selected students invest six weeks in the program and receive a stipend for their time. In addition to working on a specific research study, the students take part in an array of activities developed to enhance their understanding of the aging process and provide opportunities for interaction with older adults.

This year’s activities included a field trip to the Center of Functional MRI to look at brains with dementia; a visit to the Center for the Future of Surgery to try a surgical robot that helps older adults avoid side effects after minimally invasive surgeries; learning about research ethics and the genetics of aging; and performing neuropsychological assessments for signs of clinical decline.

At the conclusion of the summer program, students were required to complete a personal reflective essay and give an oral presentation to follow students and faculty.

Here are some of the highlights from select students’ experiences in their own words.

“Moments I loved...”

“My experience here in the HS STAR program never had a dull moment. It is by far the most interesting summer job I have ever had. I am glad to say that today I see the research world with new eyes. The lessons I learned and the people I met truly inspired and motivated me.”

“Besides all the fascinating activities and didactics we took, the one experience that most impacted me was meeting my mentor. She also stressed the fact that sometimes the best way to learn is when you fall on your face and get up to try it again.”

“Of my biggest accomplishments here at the HS STAR program was learning so much about the research world and life. I learned that research takes time and patience. Sometimes projects don’t take off as soon as you would like. Research also takes teamwork and communication. Without communication, a team cannot be as efficient or as productive.”

“Being a Latina and first in my family to go to college, this program was eye-opening to me. I was able to learn about different career paths from faculty members who come from performing neuropsychological assessments for signs of clinical decline.”

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WINTER
How to be Tech-Savvy and Tech-Safe
Presented by Camille Nebeker, PhD
Wednesday, January 15, 2020
6:15–7:15 p.m.
Liebow Auditorium, UC San Diego

SUMMER
Symposium for Healthy Aging
Thursday, June 4, 2020
Atkinson Hall, UC San Diego

Meet This Month’s Successful Ager: Julia Hawkins

BY MAJA GAWRONSKA, MA

How old is too old to take up a new sport? Julia Hawkins started biking in her seventies and wanted to do it well. So, she trained every day and attended the Senior Olympics in biking annually. Things started to slow down, however, around her 100th birthday. It became more and more challenging to bike up a hill. But this centenarian was not going to finally retire. Hence, her next act: running.

Hawkins took up running at age 100, and now, at age 103, she does it competitively. This year, at the National Senior Games, she ran both the 50-metre and 100-metre dashes, earning her new nickname “Hawkins the Hurricane.” “I hope I’m inspiring others to realize you can still be doing it at this kind of an age,” she told reporters at the Senior Games. In 2017, at age 101, Hawkins set the world record for her age group of 40.12 seconds in the 100-meter dash at the USA Track and Field Outdoor Masters Championships. She also holds the centenarian world record in the 60-meter dash.

Asked about her secret to successful aging, Hawkins said that passion is the key to everything. “Passion keeps you going at any age. At my age, every day is a miracle. So better have a passion that will make you want to live and be active,” said Hawkins. She also urges others to keep in good shape and exercise. For Hawkins, exercising comes in many forms. In addition to running, she is also a passionate gardener who spends hours outside tending to her bonsai and flowers. This retired teacher—a mother of four, grand- mother of three, and great-grandmother of one—still lives independently in a house that she and her late husband built in 1949. But she also admits that some help is needed sometimes. That’s why there’s always somebody around to come and stay in her house for the night as well as make sure that she has a good dinner and breakfast. Lunches are reserved for friends and it’s a part of Hawkins’ routine to schedule lunches almost every day to socialize.

When Hawkins looks back at her life, the moments that bring back the most joy are the ones spent with her family. She was married to her college sweetheart for seventy years before he passed away at the age of 95. They met at the Louisiana State University where Hawkins was working three jobs to put herself through college. They wed in December 1941 by telephone—she was in Baton Rouge and her husband in Pearl Harbor. The glass is never half-empty for Hawkins. She is on the lookout for something good and it always tends to happen.

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