



High schoolers dissect cow eyes as part of FSU pre-medical program

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SARASOTA — Keara Curry gingerly cuts the brown muscle away from the crystal blue-colored cornea of the eye with a scalpel.

As layers of muscle and fat peel away, she finds the thin, wiry part in the back of the eye, a nerve so small it seems unimaginable that it could be responsible for the entire sight of the cow.

“That’s the optic nerve,” said 14-year-old Curry, a first-year student at Sarasota High School. She nods with recognition.

Curry is one of 18 students with the SSTRIDE program, Science Students Together Reaching Instructional Diversity and Excellence, a partnership between Florida State University’s College of Medicine and the Sarasota County School District intended to teach lower-income students interested in science more about the medical field through mentoring and hands-on activities. The program is funded by the Charles and Margery Barancik Foundation and begins at the eighth-grade level and goes through 12th grade.

“We expose them to everything we possibly can, just because one path may not work for them,” said Cheryl Evans, the Sarasota coordinator for SSTRIDE.

As the freshmen stood poking at the cow eye, they looked engrossed and confident, carefully separating the muscle and tissue from the inner eye. One student said she wasn’t surprised by the eye’s texture and appearance, because she had dissected a sheep’s eye in eighth grade. Helen Cala, 14, said she hopes to be in the medical field one day.

“We all want to be in the medical field, and this gives us real-world experience,” Cala said. “Medicine helps people, and it answers the big questions, like why we are and who we are.”

All 18 students are taking Jackie Brown’s Introduction to Anatomy and Physiology course at Sarasota High, which combines the study of sensory organs and anatomic vocabulary with activities that simulate working with a human body. Although she offers the course for non-SSTRIDE participants, her SSTRIDE class comes with the added component of professional mentoring and development, with talks from speakers such as optometrist Denise Foran Billings, who guided the students through their dissection Thursday.

Billings’ daughter serves as a mentor for the program and asked her to help out for the day. When Billings went to optometry school, she said only 10 percent of her class was female. Now, that number has skyrocketed to 50 percent. And if the SSTRIDE class was any indication, even more women will be pursuing the medical field. Of the 18 students, only one was male.

“It’s nice to see a lot of young women,” Billings said.



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