CRESTVIEW — Rachel Simon plans to follow her mother's example.

"My mom decided she wanted to go to medical school," the Shoal River Middle School eighth-grader said. "(Then) I started to realize that I wanted to become a surgeon."

The 14-year-old already knows her dream career path.

"I want to start as a general surgeon and eventually become a heart surgeon and practice internal medicine," she said.

Rachel's getting the experience she needs from Okaloosa County's Science Students Together Reaching Instructional Diversity and Excellence program.

Crestview High School and Davidson and Shoal River Middle Schools have offered the Florida State University College of Medicine program — which includes lab work, community service opportunities and field trips — since 2003.

Rachel was among 62 of SSTRIDE's latest middle and high school students during a Jan. 27 ceremony.
Franco Simon said seeing his daughter wear a white lab coat while walking on stage with other students brought tears to his eyes.

"Watching her grow up from a child to a woman and knowing that she is going into the (medical) profession — it brings me joy," he said. "I didn't have this opportunity growing up. I tell my children to seize the moment ... the sky is the limit."

Shanice Bernard, a CHS and Davidson graduate, is learning just that. She's studying at FSU pursuing a degree in the medical field, for which she credits SSTRIDE.

"Being part of this program provided me with the support system that I needed," she said. Sponsors help support the support system, Penny Eubanks', SSTRIDE's Okaloosa County coordinator, said.

North Okaloosa Medical Center stepped into fund the group's March field trip to FSU's chemistry department, she said.

But more help is needed.

Okaloosa SSTRIDE needs the community's help to fund 26 $250 scholarships for CHS seniors who complete the program, Eubanks said.

"Every year since we have had this class, we have given each (SSTRIDE) student a $250 scholarship," she said. "These students will use this for college."

Eubanks said her busy schedule prevented her from organizing fundraisers this year.

However, "this is something I would like to continue to do (for students," she said.

Contact News Bulletin Staff Writer Matthew Brown at 850-682-6524 or matthewb@crestviewbulletin.com. Follow him on Twitter @cnbMatthew.

Copyright © 2014 http://www.crestviewbulletin.com — All rights reserved. Restricted use only.