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Summer Camp Brings Science to a Tough Urban Neighborhood



Image Title: Lisa Tisby helps camper make a papier-mache ladybug at summer science camp organized by the New Jersey State Aquarium at Camden. - Art Wilkinson

A wall mural across the parking lot provides a daily reminder that this is one summer science camp where the main goal isn't for campers to become scientists. It's for them to grow up safely so that a career involving science becomes possible.

"RIP," the sign reads in bright colors, followed by the names of young people killed in this part of Camden, New Jersey, one of the nation's poorest cities. Many of the row houses along the Street have peeling paint, broken windows and overgrown lawns. Nearby factories are locked. Graffiti shimmers in the summer heat.

"A lot of people have given up on Camden," says Lisa Tisby, who grew up in the neighborhood and now hopes to become a physician. "All the people that could make a difference have left." Not all Tisby turned down a higher-paying secretarial job this past summer to share her interest in science with local children at the camp organized by the New Jersey State Aquarium at Camden. Supported by a precollege science education grant from the Institute, the camp provides a lively assortment of hands-on lessons, field trips and recreational activities for 60 children.

Tisby, 19, is one of the counselors. Her brother is in prison for dealing drugs. Her three sisters became pregnant while in high school. Some of her friends have been raped or murdered. Tisby herself struggled during her first year at the Camden campus of Rutgers University, and worries about gaining admission to medical school. But she won't give up on the neighborhood.

"I can't leave my kids," she says while taking a break from helping her group of 5-, 6- and 7-year-olds to make colorful papier-mache ladybugs. "If I've learned anything, it's that one person can make a big difference."

"I don't just see this as a place to come and get a paycheck," agrees her assistant, 15-year-old Shaun Jenkins. While the paint dries on the giant ladybugs, he and Tisby lead the children outside to look for insects in a courtyard of Coopers Poynt Elementary School, where the camp meets in the classrooms and a guard watches the entrance. "They're very serious about protecting the children," says the aquarium's Angie Wenger, the young marine biologist who directs the camp. Less than five years old, the aquarium is located along the east bank of the Delaware River, across from downtown Philadelphia. Local planners, noting the success of aquariums in Baltimore and other cities, hoped the new structure would stimulate development in Camden. Initial attendance figures were disappointing. But following a recent remodeling, the aquarium now bustles with colorful exhibits and demonstrations.

It also has expanded its outreach programs with the community. The HHMI grant supports the summer camp, weekly ecology club meetings during the school year and a junior staff program for Jenkins and other local teenagers. The junior staffers take a 10-week training course at the aquarium, where they learn about everything from oceanography to public speaking. Then they become "explainers" at aquarium exhibits and shows. Finally, when the summer comes, they work at the science camp.

"We want them to develop responsibility and think about higher education," says Wenger. "They need these skills to be successful in the workplace. The junior staffers, who receive a modest salary, have traveled to Florida and elsewhere to study the marine environment.

Many of the counselors hope to pursue careers in medicine or teaching as well as in other fields. And they clearly enjoy helping the campers learn

about biology, particularly about the local ecology. While Tisby and Jenkins help the youngest children make ladybugs, for example, an older group of children designs masks in the shape of bears and other animals. Another group makes "fossils" from shells and clay, while the oldest group of five middle school boys makes plans to build a working model of an aquifer.

"We need a lot more minorities in science," says Lisa Tisby, who was a junior counselor last year before being promoted this summer. "You need to learn about science to find out if it's what you really want to do."

Tisby personifies both the challenge and promise facing not only the Camden aquarium project but also HHMI-funded efforts in Chicago, Memphis, Jacksonville and other inner-city neighborhoods. The hurdles she faces are daunting, but so is her determination to succeed and help those around her.

Now a college sophomore, she calls on working scientists to "get more involved personally in helping kids like these." And she emphasizes that programs like the one in Camden are essential if talented minority children from poor neighborhoods are to have a chance in the world of science.