

## Buchtel students visit Kenya via biostatistics program

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### *Trip to Kenya caps off nine-week program*



**BRAIN students from Buchtel Community Learning Center are shown during their visit to Kenya this summer at the Kisii Eye Care Institute with the two doctors there. From left are Brandon Foster, BRAIN founder Lillian Prince, O'Shae Foster, Dr. Jacqueline Kiage, Dr. Daniel Kiage, Shaun Cooper, Michael Connalley, Najm Porter and one of the group's Kenyan contacts, Alex Opande.**

WEST AKRON — A group of Buchtel Community Learning Center students spent their summer vacations studying biostatistics, culminating in a trip to Kenya, where they volunteered in an eye care clinic Aug. 4 to 11.

The trip was part of the inaugural year of a nine-week program to expose minority students to the field through speakers, field trips, research opportunities and shadowing eye care professionals at Akron Children's Hospital.

The program — Biostatistics and Research Awareness Initiatives Network Inc., or BRAIN for short — is the invention of Cuyahoga Falls resident Lillian Prince. Biostatisticians analyze health-related data, said Prince.

Currently a doctoral student at Kent State University (KSU) in public health, Prince has master's degrees in secondary education and statistics. She is a teacher of business statistics at The University of Akron (UA) and KSU's Stark campus. She taught math to younger students for 15 years and has worked in statistical roles at Case Western Reserve University and Akron Children's Hospital, according to her biography.

She submitted a proposal to the American Statistical Association (ASA), which was looking to fund projects to encourage students to pursue biostatistics as a potential career choice, in November 2013 with the idea to start BRAIN. In her proposal, Prince argued that although the field is on the rise, there are still very few people of color, particularly African Americans, working in biostatistics.

The BRAIN program aims to expose young people to the field of biostatistics earlier in their lives than might otherwise have been, said Prince.

Prince, who is African American, said her own experience is an example. She didn't learn of the field until about eight years ago, when she was finishing a master's degree in education, she said, and she enrolled in a course on statistics for life sciences at UA.

A \$4,500, one-time grant from the ASA for the pilot program has allowed a small group of teenagers to be exposed to biostatistics much earlier in their educations, however.

The money, along with Prince's savings, have gone toward educating the six African-American young men who participated this year, all students at Buchtel, which is also Prince's alma mater.

The two seniors and four juniors started June 15 and attended a closing banquet Aug. 14.

Prince is seeking funding for future sessions of BRAIN now, with hopes of including females in the program down the road, she said.

Prince said after she was approved for the grant, she started working with Marlise Ramsey, a counselor at Buchtel, to find participants. Prince visited several science classes at Buchtel and asked boys who were interested in the program to fill out applications. The boys filled out two forms – one to enable them to volunteer at Akron Children's Hospital and another to gauge their knowledge and interest in biostatistics.

Five of the young men chosen to participate in BRAIN said they hope to have careers in health or health sciences using statistics and one plans to pursue business, said Prince. And all six were willing to give up a large portion of their summer vacations to explore a field they knew little about and build their résumés.

Every weekday, the high school students met at Akron Children's Hospital at 8:30 a.m. Until 2:30 p.m. each day, they shadowed and learned from geneticists, optometrists and ophthalmology technicians. They also spent that time practicing biostatistics techniques using computerized spreadsheets.

In addition, they were exposed to a set of diverse speakers, including a number of prominent minority men and women working in the health care field. Speakers included Dr. David Gordon, dean of the College of Health Sciences at UA; Dr. Charles Modlin, director of the Minority Men's Health Center at the Cleveland Clinic; Felicia Hardnett, mathematical statistician for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta; and other physicians, local leaders, scientists, professors and statisticians.

The group also took a two-day field trip to Philadelphia to visit a program similar to BRAIN, offering an opportunity to learn a web application for building and managing online surveys and databases, Prince said.

The trip to Kenya wasn't a part of the grant proposal, said Prince. After a visit to the country this past spring, during which she accompanied a colleague whose Kenyan relative needed to have cataracts removed, she decided to add to the BRAIN course of study, she said.

The Buchtel students went to the Kisii Eye Care Institute, where they shadowed Dr. Daniel Kiage, initiating a partnership Prince hopes to keep developing.

“There’s definitely a need,” she said.

It would be beneficial to both sides to have the partnership continue, she added.

The BRAIN group stayed in hotels in Nairobi and Kisumu and were able to explore those regions, Prince said. They also visited a giraffe park and went on safari in Nairobi National Park, the only city in the world with a game park inside its boundaries, she said.

They also spent time in some outlying villages, where they met the Blue Sisters Women’s Group, a women’s empowerment group.

The trip was positive for the Buchtel students, said Prince.

“I believe it was an eye-opening experience for them,” and gave them an appreciation for being home afterward, she said.

“I believe the experience of traveling to Kenya gave them an idea of what their possible selves could be ... and makes them a bit more global,” she added.

Najm Porter, a junior at Buchtel, said participating in the BRAIN program helped him learn leadership and teamwork skills.

The trip to Kenya expanded the 16-year-old’s worldview, he said.

“It was eye-opening how different people live,” he said.

People respond differently to education, he added, in some cases waking up three hours earlier than he has to in order to arrive at school on time.

“People in Kenya were more friendly and open to meeting people,” he said.

Porter said he hopes to attend KSU in the future and become a surgical technician.

For more on BRAIN, visit [www.brainprogram.org](http://www.brainprogram.org).

Brandon Foster, at left, explains to Najm Porter, with Michael Connalley on his right, where to fix his gaze on a device built by Dr. Haynes Robinson, a geneticist at Akron Children's Hospital. BRAIN students learned the device can be used to determine the average distance between human eyes.



Photos courtesy of Lillian Prince



Buchtel student Shaun Cooper explains the anatomy of the eye to Barbara Brown from Akron Children's Hospital Human Resources. During the nine-week BRAIN program this summer, Cooper did a research project on the outside anatomy of the eye.



Buchtel Community Learning Center students, shown from left, Najm Porter, Brandon Foster and O'Shae Foster, traveled to Kenya this summer to learn about biostatistics by participating in the BRAIN program. The trip included a visit to Nairobi National Park, where they met local school children.

Photo courtesy of Najm Porter