Buchtel alumna seeks to increase BRAIN power at alma mater

By Cheryl Powell
Beacon Journal medical writer

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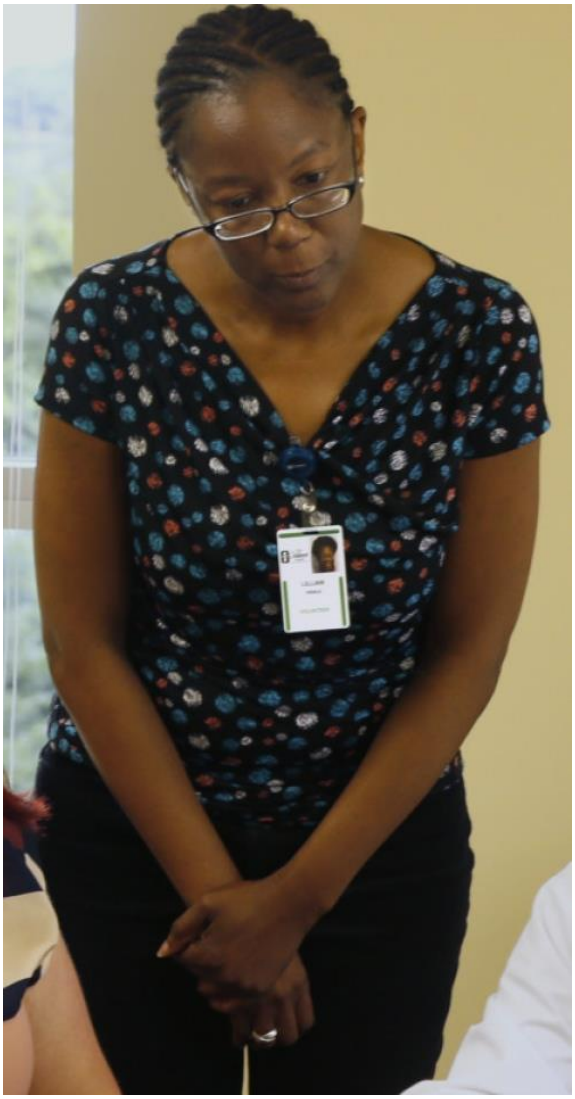
(from left) Buchtel High School students Larry Covington, Brandon Foster, Najm Porter and Shaun Cooper, Akron Children's Hospital's Dr. Casandra Solis, Buchtel graduate Lillian Prince, Akron Children's Hospital's Dr. Haynes Robinson and Buchtel students Michael Connalley and O' Shae Foster work on a device that can be used to measure the distance between people's eyes, in the Vision Center at Akron Children's Hospital on Tuesday, July 14, 2015, in Akron, Ohio. Creating the device was a research project that was part of a non-profit program that Akron-native Prince started to give other African-American students in her hometown exposure to science and math-related careers. (Ed Suba Jr./Akron Beacon Journal)

Buchtel High School student Larry Covington (left) has his eyes examined by fellow student O' Shae Foster while (from left in back) Akron Children's Hospital's Dr. Casandra Solis, Buchtel graduate Lillian Prince and Akron Children's Hospital's Dr. Haynes Robinson watch, during a meeting in the Vision Center at Akron Children's Hospital on Tuesday. The students were participating in a non-profit program that Akron-native Prince started to give other African-American students in her hometown exposure to science and math-related careers. (Ed Suba Jr./Akron Beacon Journal)



Buchtel High School graduate Lillian Prince watches as Akron Children's Hospital's Dr. Haynes Robinson works on a device that can be used to measure the distance between people's eyes with a group of Buchtel students in the Vision Center at Akron Children's Hospital on Tuesday. Creating the device was a research project that was part of a non-profit program that Akron-native Prince started to give other African-American students in her hometown exposure to science and math-related careers. (Ed Suba Jr./Akron Beacon Journal)

It didn’t take much analysis for Lillian Prince to notice a trend in all her jobs as a biostatistician.

Wherever she’s worked, fellow African-Americans — particularly males — have been mostly nonexistent in her chosen field.

“African-Americans need to be better represented,” she said.

Prince, a 1992 Buchtel High School graduate, is dedicating much of her own time and money to increasing the odds that black male teens from her alma mater pursue math and science careers.

The Biostatistics and Research Awareness Initiatives Network Inc. is a nonprofit initiative launched by Prince to expose minority high school students to careers in medicine and biostatistics, the branch of statistics that involves analyzing data from health-related fields.

Through the BRAIN program, six African-American male Buchtel students are spending this summer conducting research at Akron Children’s Hospital, where Prince previously worked as a biostatistician.

The program’s list of guest speakers includes African-American authors, doctors and researchers from Harvard University, the Cleveland Clinic, University Hospitals, Case Western Reserve University, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, Drexel University, Emory University and the U.S. Census Bureau, among others.

“They can see males who are professionals in positions of authority and leadership,” Prince said.

As part of the program, the teens have been working in the hospital’s vision center on research and learning to assist with basic exams.

Later this week, they plan to travel to Kenya to help an ophthalmologist conduct children’s eye screenings.

Najm Porter, 16, who will be a junior, said he now wants to pursue a career as a surgical tech after participating in the BRAIN program this summer.

“I always wanted to be in the medical field,” he said. “I wanted to broaden my knowledge about careers in the medical field. In school, you wouldn’t really find out about different careers in the medical field.”

Dr. Haynes Robinson, director of genetics at Children’s, has spent time working with minority students throughout his medical career to expose them to opportunities in medicine. This summer, he’s been meeting

regularly with the students in the BRAIN program to help them with research and to teach them basic medical terms and concepts.

“These are terms that kids some places already know because they’ve had the opportunity to learn them,” he said.

Prince has seen the disparity in education firsthand.

Unlike other students she met in college, Prince didn’t have the chance to take any statistics classes in high school. At the University of Akron, she was introduced to the field and finally learned about biostatistics.

“You could see how you could apply math to how the body works,” said Prince, an adjunct professor in statistics at Kent State University and the University of Akron who is pursuing a doctoral degree from Kent State. “You have data everywhere.”

Broadening horizons

For the initial year, Prince limited the BRAIN program to African-American males, based on studies showing they are extremely underrepresented in math and science fields.

According to the most recent numbers available from the National Science Foundation, only 3 percent of all scientists and engineers are African-American men.

“We need to do a better job educating our boys,” she said.

Marlise Ramsey, a school counselor at Buchtel, helped Prince select six rising juniors and seniors based on their grade-point averages and willingness to devote time to the nine-week program.

Participants spend at least four hours every Monday through Friday at Children’s.

“If they see all these doctors and authors, that can help mold what they think of themselves,” Ramsey said. “They can see, ‘I don’t have to settle for being an NBA player. I can do other things.’ ”

Participant Larry “Bo” Covington, 16, said the program has exposed him to “big words,” such as esotropia, an eye condition that can cause a cross-eyed appearance.

He wants to pursue a career in sports medicine.

“I’m really broadening my horizons with words,” he said.

The program provides a free bus pass, as well as $10 lunch vouchers for the hospital cafeteria and a textbook. Travel costs, including the upcoming Kenya trip and another recent trip to Philadelphia, also are covered.

Prince received a $4,480 grant from the biometrics section of the American Statistical Association to start BRAIN. She's seeking other support to help pay for the program, which she has subsidized.

Prince's goal is to expand the BRAIN to other communities nationwide.

"We have so much untapped talent," she said.

Cheryl Powell can be reached at 330-996-3902 or **cpowell@thebeaconjournal.com**. Follow Powell on Twitter at twitter.com/CherylPowellABJ.

About BRAIN ...

For more information about the BRAIN program or to make a donation, visit **www.brainprogram.org**.