Youth Apprentices work hard through summer days
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Do you remember Nat "King" Cole singing the praises of "the lazy, hazy, crazy days of summer?" The lyrics of that song extolled the foods, activities and mindset we all relished before entering the adult world of work; when we could enjoy every day of summer, not just one week of vacation up north and maybe a long weekend in Door County.

This summer was anything but lazy for 22 local high school students. They signed on for a very busy, even crazy summer last January when they decided to apply for a Health Youth Apprenticeship position. Wisconsin's YA program is a rigorous one- or two-year program combining academic and technical instruction with mentored, paid, on-the-job learning. There are more than 20 YA programs to choose from, but for students in the Health program, the rigor begins well before their jobs do.

In January, students wrote cover letters, developed resumes and found references to support their goal of an apprenticeship. In February, they attended an orientation session with their parents to learn about the nursing assistant class required of every student hired as a Health YA. In March, they interviewed with nursing homes and hospitals, and in April, the selected students completed 10 pages of application and registration forms to enroll in a nursing assistant class at Northcentral Technical College.

Classes started as early as May 2 and required 120 hours of classroom and clinical experience as well as hours of studying and practicing outside the classroom. Students attended an extra class to learn how to take a manual blood pressure and spent an entire Saturday learning CPR for health-care providers.

Soon, students will test with the American Red Cross to become certified nursing assistants on Wisconsin's State Registry. Then comes orientation at their worksites and, finally, students will start working as CNAs, just in time to start juggling work hours and the new school year.

Wasana Pinsonneault, a junior at D.C. Everest Senior High School, gives her perspective on the past seven months. "I thought that just getting into the apprenticeship program was difficult, but when it came to balancing studying for school finals, work and my CNA class, it really took a lot out of me. What motivated me the most was that I had a head start on achieving my goals for the future, and I was going to be able to help people that needed it. Although this whole process was difficult, I would definitely go back and do it all over again."

YAs work a minimum of 450 hours at their worksites each year of their program while taking related high school or college classes. After meeting the competencies associated with their apprenticeship program, they receive a Certificate of Occupational Proficiency that is recognized by colleges and businesses across the country from Wisconsin's Department of Workforce Development.

To connect with a student looking for an apprenticeship or to learn more about the YA program, contact your local high school YA coordinator or Donna Schulz at schulzd@ntc.edu.

Donna Schulz is the Youth Apprenticeship regional coordinator at Northcentral Technical College in Wausau.