

Pinhead Institute ushers in new summer intern class

Mary Slosson, Editor | Posted: Friday, July 3, 2015 5:34 pm

This summer, Telluride's Pinhead Institute is sending 20 of the region's best and brightest high school students to intensive science, technology, engineering and math internships across the country.

The full list of hosting institutions was released last week and includes the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics, the London Stock Exchange and non-profit organization Protect Our Winters.

"I think it's a life-changing, really enriching experience for kids," said Pinhead Institute Executive Director Sarah Holbrooke. "They will be immersed in a setting where science is what they live, eat and breathe."

The number of students the non-profit institute is supporting is a significant expansion of the program in years past. Last year eight students were placed in internships. Holbrooke noted that this year is the biggest intern class since the program began in 2003.

Participating students come from all across Southwestern Colorado, from Cortez to Ouray and from Telluride to Nucla and Norwood.

One participating student has a deeply personal reason for participating in the summer science internship program. Theo Rolfs of Telluride broke his back and pelvis a few years ago, and leveraged that experience into a summer of spinal research at the Kentucky Spinal Cord Injury Research Institute.

"The doctors told me that most people with my injury never walk again," Rolfs wrote in his letter of intent. "I never want anyone to feel the kind of pain I felt. I never want a child to be told that they will never walk again."

Many of the students who participate in the Pinhead Institute summer internship program go on to study the sciences in college. Students from the 2014 class of interns were accepted at many of the nation's top universities, including Stanford, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Princeton, Brown, Columbia and Cal Tech.

"Once they've achieved something in their lab settings, they feel like they can go for the top schools. They might not have had that confidence before their internship," Holbrooke said.

She stressed that professional and academic experience in the hard sciences is especially important for students coming from rural backgrounds where they might not have as much exposure to career possibilities in science.

“Science sometimes feels a little mystifying. Generally if you’re growing up in a small town that doesn’t have a university, you’re not exposed as much to the working world of science,” she said.

Promoting education in science, technology, engineering and math has been a national priority in recent years, with financing and vocal support coming from groups ranging from the White House to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

“STEM is going to be the answer to our future. It is a national priority. It’s an international priority,” Holbrooke added.

The 20 Pinhead Institute interns will be updating a blog on pinheadinstitute.org weekly, and will give a public presentation on their summer research in the fall.