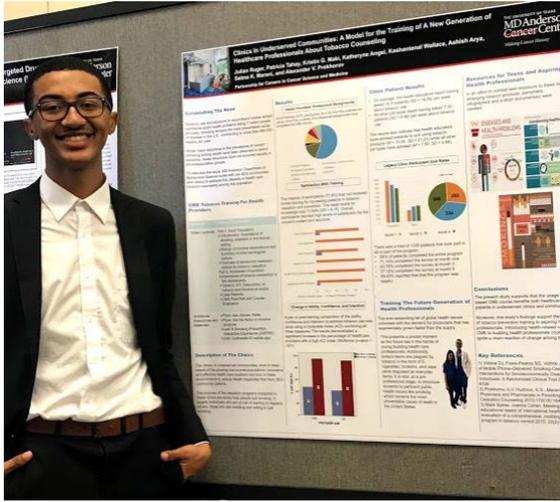


Joining the Fight in the Path to a Tobacco Free World

BY JULIAN RUGER



I could have never imagined that the summer of 2019 would bring with it the opportunity to intern at The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center. Bustling offices, patients at every corner, research and care filling the atmosphere, I couldn't picture being anywhere else. I was in one of the meccas of medical advancements with promising experiences waiting to be grabbed onto. How did this all begin you may ask? With an innovative program called ASPIRE.

I am a rising senior at DeBakey High School for Health Professions, located in the medical center. Each new school year has offered me the chance to become more immersed in the vast medical world that was all around me. I was introduced to ASPIRE in my junior year in the Patient Practicum and Care health science class. My teacher, Ms. Mari Dunlap, showed me the ASPIRE program and unknowingly changed my life forever.

ASPIRE, is a modern-day tool that targets at-risk age groups, middle and high school-aged adolescents, from developing an addiction to tobacco products. After going through ASPIRE I was imbued with a greater desire to bring change in my community. Thus, after learning about the summer internship offered by MD Anderson and the opportunity to work ASPIRE, I immediately applied and a month later arrived at the beginning of my journey in the Department of Behavioral Science.

I found myself under the mentorship of Dr. Alexander Prokhorov, MD, Ph.D., and creator of the ASPIRE program. I got to immerse myself into all that his team does by implementing and suggesting a wide array of ideas. My main summer research project took me into a world that most don't get to see: I learned about the disparities that exist between low-income populations and how they are at a higher risk to start smoking. I got to use what I learned and turned it into content that I could share with my peers.



"Julian Ruger was a lucky find for us at MD Anderson Cancer Center. He came in as a rising-senior from DeBakey High School after a rigorous selection process by the ASPIRE team's staff (Summer Experience Programs). Not only did he highlight the stop-smoking community work under Dr. Alex Prokhorov, but he also made stellar videos and graphics for the ASPIRE program's public messaging portals. Its adolescents like Julian that make the future of our country bright and full of hope".

Ashish Arya, MD, MHA
Program Director, Youth & Family Cancer Prevention
Program
Department of Behavioral Science

In today's society, teens are plagued by tobacco in the form of E-cigarettes, hookahs, and vape pens disguised as everyday items like USB drives and pens. I decided that each of us can do something to stop this vaping epidemic and became one of ASPIRE's social media ambassadors, advocating for a tobacco-free world. Through the creation of a public service announcement titled "ASPIRE: Be Tobacco Free", to the designing of several health-related infographics, I was able to renew ASPIRE'S social media presence and give a new spirit and perspective to this vital cause.

I wrote the constitution and co-founded the ASPIRE Youth council, which aims to build a community of students that strive to carry out events and programs that stresses the importance of living in a tobacco-free life. This internship has been one of the greatest opportunities I could have ever asked for, and it has truly changed my life forever. My ten weeks spent in the Department of Cancer Prevention have given me all the tools and knowledge needed to bring about impactful change not only in my own life but in the lives of those around me as well. With smoking being the most preventable cause of death in the United States, the time for innovative action is upon us and I am proud to be a part of the change.