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Soto/Sonnenschein Laboratory at the Tufts University School of Medicine
GNBCC Students & Scientists Program, July 2015

As I prepared to enter 150 Harrison Ave I stood motionless, overwhelmed by the experience that lay before me. It was my first time in a college atmosphere and in a lab environment. And on top of that I was alone (of course I had my partner Ailin too). If this is you, as you also prepare to embark on this journey, do not worry. You may not know it, but this will be the most extraordinary and eye-opening experience of your life.

Cheryl greeted us with a smile that morning (and every morning after that), and instantly Ailin and I softened, reassured that our time here will be everything we had hoped plus more. On that first day we were already faced with a very important question: how do our lifestyle choices, our every-day products, harm our health? The researchers asked that we set aside our knowledge from school and view science from a whole other perspective. That very day we sat, enveloped in case studies and research publications, trying to answer the question before us. What we found was shocking and perhaps even a bit disturbing.

Throughout our three-week journey we studied and analyzed a chemical by the name of Bisphenol A, or BPA, and its effect on mammary gland development as an endocrine disruptor. We soon learned BPA, and other estrogen mimickers that are structurally similar, were primarily unregulated by the FDA, found in many household rigid plastics and metal cans. Most people, I confess me included at first, are unaware to these dangers or simply choose to deny the facts since they have not encountered such harmful effects personally. We were expected to abandon (temporarily) the conventional way of thinking and consider the possibility of a new cancer theory that focuses on tissue organization. We

had the honor and privilege of working with researchers who welcomed us and treated us as one of their own, discussing with us their own projects. Each day we learned a new lab procedure that we could add to our long list, of which some include 3D cell cultures, H&E staining, imaging, and gland trimming and processing. At each Tuesday lunch meeting we enjoyed the company of all the lab members in a close-knit setting, as each researcher took his/her turn telling little anecdotes and cracking funny jokes. There we were also able to follow the progress of each researcher's project, fascinated by each new finding and encouraged to ask any questions we may have.

With much anticipation and excitement, we performed a mouse dissection and removed mammary tissue. We then spent time conducting our own research, categorizing each gland by its number of buds, its area, ductal growth, and elongation. Our research not only allowed us to explore mammary gland development but also taught us the value of patience and precision in the scientific realm.

My experience at the lab was both intriguing and informative. I arrived home equipped with new knowledge that shaped me into a more educated consumer. Prior to the summer I was very doubtful that I could have any impact on this field, but I learned that as an enlightened student I had the obligation of educating my peers and my community on prevention. Even a small difference makes a change and spreading the word is just as important as the initial discovery. Scientists cannot win the fight alone. I'm told I came home like a fanatic or a crazy person, opening drawers frantically and throwing away home goods one after another. My family and I have already started to eliminate traces of plastic in my household, replacing all of our storage containers with glass. We've installed a water filter to reduce our supply of Poland Spring water bottles. We use 100% stainless steel bottles. I'm eternally grateful to the entire

Great Neck Breast Cancer Coalition for all this positive change.

If you were initially hesitant about applying to the Students and Scientists Program I hope this has cleared up any of your reservations. I implore you to apply and take advantage of the rewarding once-in-a-lifetime opportunity before you, even if you are unsure whether you plan to pursue a scientific career in the future. I promise you will not regret it.