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Great Neck Breast Cancer Coalition Student Research Internship
Columbia University, Epidemiological Lab of Dr. Mary Beth Terry

Remarkable, engaging, inspiring, and educational are just a few of the words I would use to describe my summer experience with epidemiological research at Columbia University. From the first day, the kindness and genuine caring attitude could be felt in the interest my supervisors took to know me as they asked me to tell them about myself even though I personally felt it would be an honor to get to know them. Not only was the research itself eye-opening, studying familial and environmental links to breast cancer (in the LEGACY and Breast Cancer and the Environment Study), but the ability to truly experience a researcher's life in discussions, meetings with supervisors, and participation in projects to help the bigger studies, gave me a new perspective that I had a place and the responsibility that my actions had a greater impact. This meaningful work accompanied by the opportunity to work for people with such a level of genuine kindness and love, helped to make this summer something I can never forget.

My principal investigator Dr. Mary Beth Terry, who everyone called Mary Beth, was so welcoming, down-to-earth, and helpful even from the first day I met her. Sitting down and talking to her for the first time she engaged me about my life and even lent me two of her personal books to help introduce me to the world of epidemiology. I always felt welcome to contact her and knew that I'd always get a prompt response and a meeting time scheduled soon after. She always addressed my concerns and was willing to help and this same determination could be seen in everyone I worked with. My direct supervisor, Melissa White, sat down with me to ask me about my research interests and about my high school research projects, and assigned me my first project, identifying diet apps to be used in their studies, based on my interests in diet. Although Melissa and Dr. Terry always had packed schedules, they always made time for me.

Dr. Nur Zeinomar, a postdoctoral research scientist, and Ms. Mandy Goldberg, a data analyst, who allowed us to call them Nur and Mandy, were always ready to give helpful input and welcomed my questions about the research process and how to apply that to my personal project. They always thought up new ways I could participate in and further aid their research. I once attended a meeting for the Breast Cancer and the Environment (U01) study with Nur and was asked for my input on how to create focus groups for teens to educate about breast cancer risk. Along with the other interns, I visited the lab of this experiment and witnessed lab techniques and dissections needed to run their study investigating prenatal exposure to polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons(PAH) and their link with breast cancer. Every week interns, data analysts, and everyone in the lab met to discuss new epidemiological studies and comment in a forum where every opinion mattered and every suggestion was noted. An additional forum like this was organized for interns to analyze articles with Dr. Jasmine McDonald. Dr. McDonald in this forum, called the HICC Cure Journal Club, also mentored us on proper etiquette in professional settings and arranged a session with Columbia's Undergraduate and Graduate Admission Boards. I also was able to assist Dr. McDonald with a few of her projects, was very fun as well.

Interning with Dr. Terry was a very unique, engaging experience that not only grew my knowledge of the field of research but another side, epidemiology. My experience in this research setting not only helped to secure my interest in pursuing research in the future, but also showed me that the people who participate in breast cancer research really care about making progress in the field, and that's why they continue to succeed.