Our Stars of the Month for February 2020 are the medical students of the Brotherhood Alliance for Science Education (BASE) who are mentoring students from the nearby Paul Laurence Dunbar High School here in East Baltimore!

BASE’s members include: Jake Roberts (Curriculum Coordinator, pictured above, left), David Elias (High School Liaison, pictured above, center), Joshua Materi (Treasurer and Special Events Coordinator, pictured above, right), Vasu Manjupara (mentor), William Morgenlander (mentor), Harsha Malapati (mentor) and Srujan Kopparapu (mentor).

We spoke with BASE members about the organization’s mission and how their experiences as mentors have impacted them.

For those who may not be familiar with SNMA or BASE, could you share a little bit of background information about the group?

BASE was founded in 2010 with the goal of encouraging the personal and professional growth of minority males in Baltimore. Through interactive lessons, mentorship, and community building, we hope to empower these young men with the tools they need to advance further through higher education. Primarily, we work with students from Dunbar High School and we aim to equip these students with the skills needed to excel in personal finance, career exploration, healthy nutrition, civic engagement, professional etiquette, and explore their intellectual curiosities. For example, this year, we have held lessons from topics such as how to interview for a job to lessons on the basics of electromagnetism to workshops on how youth can engage with their communities and local politics. BASE is also built on the principle that mentorship is inherently relational. Being open, honest, and approachable with our students helps foster strong ties between mentors and students. While a good amount of relationship building happens in the classroom, the majority of it likely comes from weekly basketball sessions where mentors usually are the ones getting a lesson on the court. BASE is a great space for students and mentors to learn from each other.

How did you personally find out about BASE, and what inspired you to join the organization?

We found out about BASE through medical students from the class year above us that were already involved in BASE. The program leaders from that group invited us to join them for a few of the sessions that they led, giving us an opportunity to meet the high school students and see what the program was all about. From these experiences, we were able to see the impact of the program on these high school students. Having had strong mentors that supported us to become who we are today as medical students, we wanted to be able to give back and serve as active role models for students who might not otherwise receive that support.

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How do you find time for service in your busy schedule as medical students? How much time are you able to spend mentoring per week or per month?

While medical school definitely limits our free time, we have found that the work we do with BASE has been one of the most rewarding parts of our time here. Each Wednesday, we spend two hours with students from Dunbar High School, with the first hour involving an educational classroom and mentorship-based activity and the second hour spent in the Cooley Gym playing basketball and building our relationships with the students. We also spend time throughout the week planning our lessons and coordinating the activities. Though involvement with BASE is a significant time commitment, we have found it to be a refreshing break from our studies and enjoy the work that we are able to do with the students.

How has your experience mentoring high school students impacted you personally? Has it helped to shape your development as a health care professional?

For many of us, coming to Hopkins was a change in environment. BASE was the perfect avenue to learn more about our new Baltimore community and also become ingratiated with it. On a personal level, having a tie to the community serves to ground you as an individual because it serves to make a seemingly new environment feel more like home. Community engagement is especially important as we progress along our medical school training, as it will allow us to connect with patients and understand their many needs, namely those pertaining to cultural, social and economic factors.

What advice do you have for prospective students who are interested in mentoring or other forms of community service? What would you say to someone who is unsure of the impact his/her service would have on a community?

Our advice would be to create a space where mentees feel comfortable expressing themselves. Sometimes we have ideas of what we think is best for students but we just need to listen to the students and gauge their interests, their life goals, and their preferred learning styles. From there, cater the learning environment to meet them where they are at in life. However, it can be easy to get lost in the minutiae of mentorship. Is my lesson engaging? Was the presentation clear? Are the students paying attention? While we often want to focus on providing the best lessons to our students we have to remind ourselves that we are here to build relationships. Even if you aren’t sure of the impact you have, your care and commitment towards others will not go unnoticed. Even if we couldn’t discern the degree to which BASE would change the course of our students’ lives, we could tell that our students appreciated what we were doing. We could tell that they were listening and that they wanted to buy into a better future for themselves. For us, that made everything worth it.

Any final comments or any upcoming volunteer opportunities with BASE that you would like to share? Feel free to let others know how they can get involved, either during this year or in the future.

BASE is an amazing opportunity to share your interests and connect with the students at Dunbar High School. Through this program, we have been able to connect further with the youth community in Baltimore and have had an opportunity to make what we hope is a lasting impact on the students’ lives. While we lead the lessons each week, we also have learned much from our students about the issues surrounding the greater Baltimore community and the barriers youth in the area may face in pursuing their aspirations. If you want to get involved with BASE or learn more about the program feel free to email us at johnshopkinsbase@gmail.com. We are always looking to recruit more mentors and others in the community to serve as guest speakers and liaisons for experiential learning opportunities.

Thank you all for the tremendous service that you are doing for our community!