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Scotiabank SPISE scholar, Antiguan Joel Beazer

On a bright morning recently at the University of the West Indies Cave Hill campus in Barbados, a group of slightly-younger-than-usual students trickle back into a lab.

"How was the biochem exam?" asks their supervisor.

A chorus of groans goes up from the group.

"Oh please . you're just fine," responds their supervisor cheerfully.

She's probably right, because this is a group of some of the most brilliant young minds in the Caribbean.

They are participants in the 2013 edition of the Student Program for Innovation in Science and Engineering (SPISE), an intensive science-immersion summer programme modelled on the prestigious MITES program offered at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). All 16 students in this year's class are between the ages of 16 to 18, and came to the programme with stunning grade point averages and CXC results.

Scotiabank SPISE scholar, Antiguan Joel Beazer, is a prime example, attaining 15 grade 1s at CXC last year with 14 distinctions. About to enter his second year at the Antigua State College, Beazer gave up four precious weeks of summer vacation to take on a challenging course load of university-level calculus, physics, biochemistry, Mandarin and Caribbean studies. The SPISE scholars also tackled hands-on projects in robotics, electronics, computer programming, and entrepreneurship.

During a stretch when most other students his age were enjoying the freedom of summer vacation, Beazer was spending full days in class and long nights doing homework.

"It has definitely been very challenging - possibly even more than I expected initially," said Beazer candidly of SPISE, which is geared at preparing what the programme terms "an elite group of high-school superstars" for the rigours of university.

So why did he pick biochemistry over beach-going?

"I would have liked to do that too!" admitted the aspiring young astrophysicist with a laugh, before getting serious and adding:

"But I realise I'm going to be applying to college soon and starting my career, and I have to get into the mind-set of being dedicated to what I'm doing - not just some of the time but all of the time."

And so on that bright morning, the second to last day of the SPISE program, Beazer and his cohorts left the biochemistry exam and headed straight back to the lab to work on their robotics projects for the final project presentations.

They worked into the wee hours, fine-tuning the robots which had to be ready for an underwater competition the next day. Many of the students had never even studied robotics formally before, but in the course of four weeks they learned enough to create robots that could swim, dive, and fetch items during the challenge, using engineering, electronics, and computer programming skills in the process.

Beazer said he would advise any student seriously interested in the sciences to apply for SPISE, saying his stint had been a "great opportunity" for which he thanked Scotiabank.

However, he noted that they should be "prepared" to meet the challenge of the intense programme, pointing out: "It's not just a trip to Barbados. You have to work hard and make yourself and your sponsors proud."

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