



Alameda County: Teacher fellowships aim to improve science, math education

By Rob Dennis
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Valery Lynn has dreamed of teaching biology during the school year and working on research projects in the summer.

Now, thanks to the Industry Initiatives for Science and Math Education, her wish has come true.

Lynn was one of 14 teachers from Fremont and 36 from Alameda County who took part in the 27th annual summer fellowship program, which provided real-world experience to help them in the classroom.

In all, 155 teachers worked for eight weeks at 43 companies, universities and research labs, mostly in the Bay Area -- including Fremont-based Cordis and Mattson Technology. Other participants included Cisco Systems, Hewlett-Packard, Intel, Lockheed Martin, Synopsys, Stanford University and UC Berkeley.

"When I heard about this I said, 'This can't be possible,'" said Lynn, 44, a biology teacher at Irvington High School. She spent time on a U.S. Geological Survey ship gathering archaea microbe samples from San Francisco Bay as part of her fellowship with Stanford.

"We spend every Monday just doing educational activities, then four days I spend in the lab doing bench science," she said. "I can't imagine a more fun summer for a geek like me."

The goal is to help meet the increasing demand for stronger, more relevant science, technology, engineering and math education.

Three of the 20 fellows at Lockheed Martin this year were from Fremont, working side-by-side with engineers in space-based and missile programs

under development at the company's Sunnyvale and Palo Alto campuses.

Henry Fung, a 33-year-old computer, technology, general science, mathematics and physics teacher at Irvington High, worked on a system to identify and track space debris.

"I would say the biggest thing I learned this summer is to get a feel of what the students go through," he said.

"Sometimes, after teaching for a while, we forget what it feels like to be a learner."

Founded in 1985, Industry Initiatives for Science and Math Education helps the host organizations select qualified K-16 teachers for paid fellowships for scientific, mathematic or technical projects.

It also provides guidance and assistance to teachers while they develop a plan to transfer their experiences to the classroom. Once the school year begins, the fellows use their newfound skills to create more powerful lessons and updated curriculum for their students.

"We don't have a whole lot of time to develop brand-new curriculum, so it's a luxury to have a summer with all this support to develop new curriculum," said Lynn, who will return to school with a plan to have her students take bacteria samples from Irvington Creek, which is near the Fremont campus, and study them.

Fung, who also took part in the program last year,

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developed a plan this summer to get more girls interested in science and engineering.

"One thing I found when I started the job this summer: Of the 65 engineers I was working with, only two of them were women," he said.

"It's changing, which is good, but definitely we've still got a lot of work to do."

This was Lynn's first time in the program, and she hopes to return next year.

"I already have ideas about what I'm going to do," she said.

Contact Rob Dennis at 510-353-7010.

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