

Tennent students make grade at Stanford conference

By Gary Weckselblatt, staff writer | Posted: Wednesday, November 18, 2015 5:00 am

First it was a bank, and then a food market that opened in William Tennent High School.

Now, a major pharmaceutical company has developed a partnership with the school. And while Eli Lilly won't be setting up a satellite office in Warminster, its connection with Tennent has given a group of students the chance to share their ideas with industry experts and entrepreneurs at a major medical conference.

Tennent students recently flew to Stanford University, in Palo Alto, California, for Medicine X, which explored how technology will advance medicine, improve health and empower patients.

"They knocked their presentation out of the ballpark," said Ignacio Jayo, a science teacher at Tennent. "For them to do that at Stanford is really cool."

The participating students were seniors Caitlin Hubmaster and John Starr and Tennent graduates William Barker, Jocelyn George, Meghan Izak and Julia Romanyszyn, all now college freshmen.

Their focus was clinical research, which science teacher Steven Beal called "a million dollar a day problem. Each day sick people don't get medicine, companies don't make money. You shorten the clinical trial process, bring down the time it takes to bring a drug to market from 14 years to 12, the pharmaceutical company makes money and people get their drugs faster."

Joseph Kim, senior adviser for clinical innovation at Eli Lilly, who had worked with Jayo on other projects, called him the "critical linchpin to make this all happen." He knew of the partnerships the Centennial School District developed with ShopRite and TruMark Financial Credit Union and believed "they were hard-wired to do this."

After whittling down the number of students from 100 to six, Tennent set up two teams. Barker, Izak and Romanyszyn employed art to humanize research participation and generate an emotional



Albert Catarro (from left), business education teacher; Ignacio Jayo, anatomy and genetics teacher; and William Tennent seniors John Starr and Caitlin Hubmaster talk Wednesday, Oct. 7, 2015, about their experience going to Stanford University's Medicine X, a conference where they had to solve a problem to simplify clinical trials.

connection among volunteers and patients who have a stake in seeing better treatments become a reality.

George, Hubmaster and Starr developed a multimedia approach to help improve the understanding of trial participation in a meaningful and timely way.

Rena Friedant, an art teacher, said the art component was the "thinking outside the box" that Lilly was looking for.

Indeed, Kim praised the students' effort as "fresh thinking."

"Their ideas are things we had toyed with, but what they did validated them to some degree. They gave a more artistic perspective, which was important. I'm 43, and today's world is made up of digital people. They gave us the right lens to put on when we're thinking about solutions."

And Lilly's ability to pay the tab for airfare and the hotel stay enabled the students to rub elbows with movers and shakers they typically would not meet.

"The whole experience is something I never imagined myself doing," Starr said. "It really hit home with me."

Hubmaster said it was an ability to "meet a lot of people and network."

Dennis Best, Tennent's principal, said the district's goal "is to provide students relevant and authentic experiences and make sure they leave here with the ability to think creatively and solve complex problems to be successful outside the walls of high school."

Al Catarro, the school's business education teacher who helped organize the partnerships with ShopRite and TruMark, said the work with Lilly "kind of sets us apart as a school in the partnership game. It kind of gives us a certain degree of validity in what we do, to keep pushing the envelope further.

"For us, the inroads and contacts we're making at this point really help us provide opportunities for our students."