

Overcoming many challenges, Thomas Earns Associate Degree while in High School

Powhatan High School senior Ella Thomas is young, but has the serious, brow-knitted focus of an Olympic competitor. Mention chemistry or the University of Virginia and instantly her serious face lights up with a broad smile and twinkling eyes. “Chemistry is EVERYTHING,” Thomas says, “it’s in everything, it’s all around us.” As for the University of Virginia, that’s where she has been accepted by early decision and is headed in the fall.

As one of 19 students in the first Reynolds Community College Advance College Academy (ACA) class at Powhatan High School, Thomas on May 13 received her associate degree, nearly a month before she is set to be awarded her high school diploma.

The first Powhatan ACA graduates got their start in the program in 2014 when they were in the 8th grade. The Reynolds ACA program gives students the opportunity to earn an associate degree in social sciences while also earning a high school diploma in advanced studies. All 8th grade students are eligible to apply for the ACA. Once accepted, students begin taking honors and AP level courses during the 9th and 10th grades and dual enrollment college courses during the 11th and 12th grades, earning a total of 60 college credits.

It was clear Thomas was a candidate for such an opportunity as she was tested and moved into a Talented and Gifted program where she was told about the Reynolds ACA and encouraged to apply. Her early gifted programs had challenges, but Thomas said, “I used to breeze through school.” Then came the ACA, and she said, “I really had to do something. I really had to work hard. I became more independent and disciplined. My parents didn’t push me = they let me do my thing, but they made sure I worked.”

Given her focused mind, Thomas' passion for science, specifically biochemistry, is understandable. "In science everything is concrete. There is a single answer to questions, it's not open to interpretation." She shakes her head, "History is not my thing. I like straightforward answers." Her passion for biochemistry is also personal. She would like to research and create new drugs and to be involved in the process of finding cures. She has experienced healthcare first-hand and knows what it means to need drugs – Thomas has cystic fibrosis.

When asked what advice she would give students thinking about applying for the ACA, without hesitation she says, "It's not for the weak of heart. It's a lot of hard work. But, it's great. Even if you don't know what you're going to do, it [the program] lets you explore lots of things and figure out what you like and don't like. It's very rewarding to get two years of college out of the way before the end of high school." Is she ready for the University of Virginia? "I hope I am," she says, followed quickly by, "I know I am."

Reynolds ACA Career Coach at Powhatan High School Rick Cole reflected on this first Powhatan ACA cohort group, "This has been a terrific group of students who have truly chosen a road less traveled. They were willing to take a risk and they have persevered in what is one of the most challenging programs at their high school. We have learned so much from our ACA "pioneers" at Powhatan High School. Their questions and feedback have enabled us to make several small tweaks that have resulted in a much stronger program for the classes that have followed them".

To find out more about the Reynolds ACA program, visit www.reynolds.edu/ACA.

Article provided by Reynolds Public Relations Assistant Carolyn Steffen.

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