

Trina Davidson-Brooks remembers when her eyes were opened to the inner workings of the legal world.

As a student at West Point High School, Davidson-Brooks took part in a program called DECA that allowed students to leave school early to gain job experience in a career that interested them. She didn't know it at the time, but Davidson-Brooks quickly found her calling.

"I was the only student who went through the program who wanted to work in a law firm," Davidson-Brooks said. "I ended up working for Turner & Associates in West Point. I worked there for about two years."

Davidson-Brooks went on to earn a bachelor's degree from Mississippi University for Women and to graduate from law school at Mississippi College in Jackson. She has worked in the legal field for more than 10 years and is now an assistant district attorney who prosecutes felony cases for the 16th Circuit Court District, which includes Clay, Lowndes, Oktibbeha and Noxubee counties.

Amber Salone hopes to learn a lot from Davidson-Brooks, District Attorney Scott Colom and everyone in the DA's office so she can forge her own path. The New Hope High School senior is the first student to take part in the Epic Work Experience Program (WEX Program) being offered through AccelerateMS' Career Coach Program and funded by the America Rescue Plan Act, or with ARPA funds.

Three Rivers Planning and Development District career coaches assist with the implementation of the program in high schools. Juniors and seniors are eligible for the program, which enables them to take their learning outside of their classrooms and to explore and experience their desired career path. Students also can learn valuable life skills they can use as they prepare for their post-secondary career and education goals.

“It has been amazing,” Salone said. “I have gotten an opportunity to do a couple of different things. I have gotten a lot of insight and feedback on how I should approach going into my major and what I should minor in.”

Salone is considering the University of Mississippi, Mississippi State University and Howard University. She said she initially intended to study forensic science but the death of her uncle, Micheal Jones, influenced her to choose political science because she is motivated to help families that have had family members killed.

Salone said her eyes have been opened to the legal world, just like the initial experience of Davidson-Brooks, who is her worksite supervisor. When she first started, Salone admitted she thought she was going to do a lot of desk work, but the experience has surpassed her expectations.

“My whole courthouse experience was amazing,” Salone said. “Everyone who works here is very active, and it is just a good experience to talk to different people. I love how people work together on projects and they communicate really well. It has been a good experience so far.

“I have gotten more insight and I am *really* ready to go to law school.”

New Hope High career coach Knollie Edge said she, Jenny Box, the school’s 11th- and 12th-grade counselor, and New Hope High Principal Matt Smith select students for the program after talking to them. She said the school secures a business or work site to partner with the school that can provide a learning environment and job experience for students. Edge said students can spend 100 hours at one worksite, or spend 50 hours each at two worksites, and are paid via the ARPA funds on a scale decided by their worksite manager. Once the student finishes

their time with the WEX Program, the worksite can choose to bring them on as an official employee/intern as they see fit.

“Amber was our first student to invite into this new opportunity,” Edge said. “We wanted a strong candidate for our first run through the WEX Program, and her history of being a dedicated student and engaging member of her community made her a perfect fit. She is a self-starter and extremely dedicated to her future. We knew she would be great, and we were right.”

Davidson-Brooks said Salone has completed a variety of tasks in a short amount of time, including transcribing recorded statements to help attorneys as they prepare for trials, assisting in case prep, which includes creating summaries of key facts in a file and compiling witness lists, as well as helping a victims’ assistance coordinator.

Davidson-Brooks said she was excited when she heard about the WEX Program because her experience in DECA laid the foundation for nearly every step she took after high school. She said the WEX Program can do the same for students, even if they don’t go into the legal field or don’t pursue a career related to their internship.

Salone, who is on track to complete the internship this week, said her experience has been invaluable because she has been exposed to plenty of things, including the inner workings of the legal world. For instance, Salone said she didn’t know how closely Janie Shields, a victim assistance coordinator, worked with those involved in crimes. During her time with Shields, Salone said Shields played Uno, a card game, with a victim to help that person feel comfortable.

Edge thanked Colom and everyone at the DA’s office for being involved in the project. And while Salone’s experience has been positive, Edge knows some students who are selected for the program might discover

they want to work in another field. She said that experience will be beneficial, too, because it will help students identify a new career path.

“My main goal for students who take part in this incredible opportunity is that they come out of the WEX Program with a well-rounded understanding of their future,” Edge said. “My job is to help students be successful in whatever they choose to do when they leave our school. Starting with Amber and for every kid we bring into this program, I hope it brings them one step closer to that.”

Students who would like to sign up for an opportunity to be selected for the WEX Program in the 2024-25 school year should contact Edge at: knollie.edge@lowndes.k12.ms.us.