

The Career Technology Center has helped change how Alexa Cherry sees her future.

Cherry, a junior at New Hope High School, thought she wanted to be a pediatrician. She said she changed her mind after she felt bad giving a COVID-19 test to a child and shifted gears to become a clinical geneticist.

“My time here has helped me understand some of the different careers and not just what I want to do,” Cherry said. “Initially, I wanted to do different things and I learned about other stuff here, and it helped me figure out what I wanted to do with my life.”

Cherry is broadening her horizons at the CTC while her future comes into focus. On March 26-28, Cherry and other CTC students participated in the Mississippi HOSA State Conference at the Cadence Bank Arena in Tupelo. The students competed in multiple skill and health knowledge competitions.

Cherry led the way with a third-place finish in Clinical Lab Science. Ava Parker (Clinical Nursing) and Alannah James (Medical Reading) finished fifth in their categories. Cherry’s finish qualified her for the HOSA International Leadership Conference (ILC), which will be in June 26-29 in Houston, Texas.

“I was honestly very shocked I finished third,” Cherry said.

Anne Clemmons, a Health Science instructor at the CTC, said this was Cherry’s first year competing in the Clinical Lab Science competition at HOSA and that she placed first in the Northern District competition. She is the CTC’s first HOSA student to qualify for the ILC.

“We are so very proud for her to represent our HOSA chapter at ILC,” Clemmons said. “She worked hard to prepare for her skills competition, and often came after school to practice in the lab.

“Alexa is very smart and determined. She works hard in my class and is goal-oriented.”

Clemmons said this was the CTC’s best year for competition. In all, 22 students qualified for the state conference, and she and Cheltsi Saucer, who also is a Health Science instructor at the CTC, took 11 to compete at the state conference competition in Tupelo.

Cherry said the competition helped her develop her problem solving skills because students faced different scenarios and had to figure out what they needed to do. She said she isn’t sure what to expect at the ILC, but she knows it will help prepare her for her next steps.

Next school year, Cherry will take the CTC’s third-year Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) class with Saucer. A CNA is an entry-level role that provides vital support to patients and nurses. Cherry said that work will give her a better chance to get into her top schools and get a basic understanding of the field work.

Cherry also plans to take a microbiology class and a nutrition class online at East Mississippi Community College. Next school year, she will take a dual-credit Biology class. Cherry said those studies will provide a foundation for her work as a clinical geneticist, a medical doctor specializing in managing patients and families with or at risk of a genetic condition. They work closely with genetic counselors to support patients, families and clinical teams in the management of genetic conditions.

Cherry said a clinical geneticist is more of a hospital position, so her studies at the CTC will help cover the basics and prepare her for medical school. She said the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, Stanford University or the University of California at Berkeley are some of the possibilities.

Even though she said she fell in love with Biology in the ninth grade, Cherry admitted she was surprised she found another field so quickly after realizing she didn't want to see kids in pain every day. Initially, she said she wanted to work in a children's hospital because her sister had lymphangioma when she was younger and the family was always in the hospital. Lymphangiomas are noncancerous, fluid-filled cysts that form in children, often on the head and neck. The cysts form when lymph fluid backs up and doesn't flow normally through tissues.

The timing turned out to be right for Cherry, though, because she was doing clinicals and taking Biology at New Hope High at the same time. That's when Cherry discovered a different path that for now looks like the one for her. If not for her time at the CTC, Cherry isn't sure where she would be.

"We studied genetics right after I had my clinicals and I remembered I liked it in ninth grade and doing it again in 11<sup>th</sup> grade I was like, 'I really like this, and I like learning about the different diseases and everything'," Cherry said. "Having that lined up probably helped, but if I didn't have that I don't know what I would have picked because I hadn't taken Biology in a year, so I probably would have been lost for a while."

HOSA-Future Health Professionals, formerly known as Health Occupations Students of America, is a global student-led organization recognized by the U.S. Department of Education, the Department of Health and Human Services and several federal and state agencies. HOSA's mission is to empower students to become leaders in the global health community, through education, collaboration and experience. HOSA promotes career opportunities in the health industry to enhance the delivery of quality health care to everyone.