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COMMENTARY

CAUSE fuels passion for research

KIMBERLY CASIANO, CHRIS CASTILLO, DIMITRI FRANCIS and CRYSTELE MALDONADO

We recently had the chance to travel to Washington, D.C., for a national conference about after-school, before-school and summer learning programs. Not only did we get to meet other youth from across the country, we also had the chance to visit Capitol Hill and meet with members of Congress to share the ways these programs help teach our generation about science, technology, engineering and math, or STEM.

As 10th- and 12th-graders who attend several different Camden City schools and participate in the Community and Urban Science Enrichment (CAUSE) program at the Center for Aquatic Sciences at Adventure Aquarium, we know firsthand how valuable after-school STEM experiences can be.

In our after-school program, we've had the chance to participate in a multi-year youth development program that teaches science-based content that enhances public speaking and professional skills. We've worked on research vessels, done water-quality monitoring of our local watersheds, participated in a multitude of science activities in natural areas and traveled to beautiful places we never thought existed.

A major experience in the program is the five-week summer camp in which CAUSE teens, including us, research and write curriculum to teach to Camden youth from grades K to 8. We use informal teaching to educate communities in the city and surrounding area.

We love our after-school program, and having the chance to use science to develop our personal and professional skills has been fun and has given us lots of confidence. A year ago, we never imagined that we could make a difference by teaching youth and families in



PHOTO PROVIDED

Members of the CAUSE program meet with Sen. Cory Booker's staff during a recent visit to Washington, D.C. The Camden students study waterways through the program at the Center for Aquatic Sciences at Adventure Aquarium.

our community about keeping our waterways clean. Many of these people listen and even make an effort to become stewards of their environment.

We also thought it was an amazing experience to speak to congressmen and senators to support after-school programs. The CAUSE program has also increased our interest in the math and science we learn in school. And it's completely changed our thinking about college and careers. One hundred percent of CAUSE program participants graduate from high school and attend college. We plan to keep up that great tradition.

We know that there will be many more jobs in STEM fields in coming years and not enough people trained to do those jobs. Coming from groups that are especially underrepresented in those fields (Hispanic/black/women), we know how important it is to work hard and stay involved. Because of what we've learned in our after-school program, we hope to help turn that trend around.

Kimberly Casiano, 18; Chris Castillo, 18; Dimitri Francis, 18; and Crystele Maldonado, 15, live in Camden and are members of the CAUSE program.