

National Youth Safety Essay Scholarship Contest Winner

Afiya Ward

Central High School

The COVID-19 Pandemic caused a lot of disappointing changes in my plans for the summer of 2020. My graduation ceremony was canceled, the youth leadership program I designed was forced to go virtual, and my family's trip to Jamaica was canceled. So as you can imagine, I, along with most of my peers, didn't have much to look forward to during the summer. For the most part, our low expectations for the summer ended up being pretty spot on. There wasn't a lot to do when it came to social interactions because they were all being converted to virtual settings, which just isn't the same.

As the summer went on, something I began to realize was that there actually were multiple organizations who were leveraging technology in a way that others were failing to do. They were putting resources behind programs that used technology for what it's best at, rather than trying to use it to replace face-to-face interactions, while using meeting platforms like Zoom as supplements to the actual program - not as the actual program. This was really exciting to me because I had spent so much time being saddened by the lack of meaningful programs that were available for me to participate in, as I have over previous summers.

One of the very best examples of meaningful and impactful programming that I experienced over the summer was in participating in the OSHA 10-Hour General Industry CareerSafe Course. This is a rigorous course that takes students through a process of learning information and procedures, taking mini exams throughout, and, finally, taking a final exam to assess the knowledge that they gained through the course. Once the student has successfully completed the final exam, they receive an official certificate and physical wallet card, certifying that they have completed the course.

I was introduced to this opportunity through a program at my high school called "Earn As You Learn." The coordinator of the program, Ms. Chan recognized the amount of valuable time students were wasting over the summer, simply due to a lack of opportunities, and she and her team felt like the OSHA certification program would be an impactful and productive thing to connect these students to, so she did just that. When Ms. Chan told me about this program, I immediately jumped at the opportunity, mostly because it sounded cool and I didn't have much else to do, but I'm so glad that I did.

My experience in this program was amazing. I learned so much about health and safety in the workplace, and I learned why it's so important for me and others to know this information. I have been working jobs since my freshman year of high school, and, as a recent graduate, I'm a little disappointed that I didn't have this insight sooner. Thanks to this course, I now have the awareness and the ability to recognize and call out hazards and safety issues wherever I go, keeping myself and others around me safer. One really cool aspect of this program is that not only does it take you through the course, but once completed, it gives you something to show for your completion. The wallet card and certificate may seem small, but they make a huge impact on the confidence of the student to speak out when they recognize hazards. Whether I continue my career in Corporate America or become an entrepreneur, these skills and confidence will be crucial to my safety and success for the rest of my life.

I would really recommend that more students participate in this opportunity to further their knowledge around a topic that couldn't be more crucial or relevant - safety. As more people become aware of hazards and standards, and are comfortable and confident calling them out, workplaces will inevitably become safer for everyone.