Advocate staff photo by BRADBOWIE

Lori Rubin works with students enrolled in the Upward Bound program on Wednesday in Wharton Hall at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. The summer residential program targets high school students who would be the first in their family to attend college, in the hopes that they realize it is an attainable goal.

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Kids prepare for college
life, classes at UL-Lafayette
through Upward Bound

BY SETH DICKERSON
Special to The Advocate

LAFAYETTE — When Julie Yavarian graduated high school in 1984, she had dreams of being the first in her family to obtain a college degree.

"I had no one in my family to advise me," she said. "Their only advice to me was, 'good luck!""

Yavarian graduated from the University of Louisiana at Lafayette in 1989 with a degree in English education with the help of the Upward Bound college prep program while in high school. She's now the math and science administrative coordinator for the program.

Entering its 42nd year of giving high school students like Yavarian a chance to catch the college bug, the Upward Bound program selects high-performing Acadiana students from low-income families who would be the first in their family to receive a bachelor's degree and allows them a six-week sample of UL-Lafayette's campus life.

"They have an opportunity to live on campus and experience the college life," said Upward Bound associate director Constance Martel Broussard, who has been with the program for 18 years. "They have a very...

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BRILEY BERNIS-BERGERON, Breaux Bridge High School senior

It develops you as a person and as a leader. It helps you to interact with other people, and be a better person yourself."

DUSTIN FORD, Opelousas High School senior

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good time, but they have to work very hard and they have to produce.

The students stay in the university's Conference Center dormitory and take classes to prepare a majority of them for their upcoming senior year. Most of the students in the program have been involved with it since they were high school freshmen.

"I've fallen in love with this school because of this program," said Northwest High School senior Peyton Fontenot. "I love the atmosphere, I love the people here on campus, and I've met people I feel I have more in common with. I feel so much at home."

During their stay, the students take math, science, foreign language, computer science and English courses taught by high school teachers and one undergraduate student. Along with instruction and lodging, the program also readies kids for the college experience.

"It's wonderful," Breaux Bridge High School senior Briley Bemis-Bergeron said outside her genetics class. "If I hadn't joined this, I would be so unprepared for college. Most people say, 'When you go to college, no one holds your hand.' But Upward Bound has been the bridge between high school and college. You're better prepared; you have that college experience before you go."

Another student in the class, Opelousas High School senior Dustin Ford, agreed with Bemis-Bergeron. He plans to attend UL-Lafayette with a premedicine studies major in biology.

Lori Rubin works with students enrolled in the Upward Bound program on Wednesday in Wharton Hall on the campus of the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. The summer residential program targets high school students who would be the first in their family to attend college, in the hopes that they realize it is an attainable goal.

"It develops you as a person and as a leader," Ford said of Upward Bound. "It helps you to interact with other people and be a better person yourself."

Biology teacher Lori Rubin led the group of about a dozen students, including Ford and Bemis-Bergeron, in dissecting a cow's heart.

"I loved it," Bemis-Bergeron said after the class. "I want to be a nursing major, so I love that stuff. You kind of have to!"

In computer science teacher Rizwan Merchant's Web design class, the students are creating a basic Web page complete with pictures, links and text.

Merchant is the only undergraduate student teaching classes in Upward Bound.

"These kids like having fun and I like having fun, so it's a good mix," he said.

"Mr. Merchant is funny," said Abbeville High School senior Trinity Broussard. "He's so chill and relaxed. He has this weird personality that's totally his own. He's not a carbon copy of anyone else."

Merchant, 26, is pursuing a degree in computer science at the university and is the lead programmer in the student engineering group's CAPE satellite.

"I like that we're inspiring the next generation to care about their future," Merchant said. "During the summer, a lot of kids are at home playing video games and not really doing anything productive. So, when the fall rolls around, they're not prepared because they're not in the right state of mind for school. They have to spend two months trying to get back into the rhythm."

Constance Broussard said the office is looking to work with the school's new provost, James Henderson, to have the classes this summer count for credit when the students get to college.

Of course, it's not all classes and work.

Some nights, students are shuttled to the university's Bourgeois Hall, which offers sports facilities and programs, for students to let out the stress of classes through physical exercise before calling it a night. Other extracurricular activities include movie nights and trips to the Paul and Lulu Hilliard University Art Museum.

"It's similar to running a small school," Constance Broussard said.

Helping Broussard run the program are many former Upward Bound students.

Crystal Vallier completed the program in 2000 and graduated from UL-Lafayette with a degree in education in 2004. She received a master's degree in public administration from Southern University and now works for Broussard as a counselor.

"The experience was very rewarding for me," Vallier said. "I got a feel for the university, as well as understanding federal aid. I credit the Upward Bound program for my success."

"If anyone you know, would have the chance to join it, join it," Bemis-Bergeron said. "It's the best thing you can do to prepare for college. When I first came, I didn't want to be a part of it. My mom made me do it, and now I'm so glad she did because it's the best thing I've ever done."