

Final Reflection on My 2026 Summer Enrichment Experience at the University of Notre Dame Summer Scholar's Program

by Anne Popit

The first time I remember having heard about The Garwin Family Foundation was sometime during seventh or eighth grade, when my mother showed me a post she had seen on Facebook detailing how a student from Cartersville had attended The University of Michigan on a Garwin Scholarship. She stressed that this would be an excellent opportunity for me to look into in the future, especially considering my academic inclination and previously expressed interest in visiting out of state universities. I cannot recall much more from that conversation. My interest had been piqued, but at the time, any thought of my upcoming transition into high school seemed daunting, so even fully considering something remotely collegiate was likely to be overwhelming. However, I completed that seemingly terrifying metamorphosis from middle schooler to high schooler significantly more readily than I had first anticipated, and during my freshman year, I found myself continually orbiting the idea of applying for Garwin. I would hear the foundation name mentioned by teachers, and once again it was promoted as an exceptional opportunity for high schoolers seeking higher education and a chance to explore collegiate life. I attended an informational meeting where past alumni of the foundation spoke of their summer experiences, each reiterating how formative their chosen programs had been. My personal trajectory that year led me to apply for a summer internship with SIH rather than to Garwin, but everyone I knew who applied for a scholarship enthusiastically relayed their excitement for the summer and emphasized that the program was an extraordinary opportunity. From the beginning, the Garwin Family Foundation had been described to me as an outstanding organization, characterized by providing these exceptional chances to find passion and foster curiosity. However, that flattering depiction is enough to properly or comprehensively convey how much my own experience with Garwin - and the opportunity it gave me to attend the University of Notre Dame's Summer Scholars program in neuroscience - has come to mean to me.

Neuroscience first became personally relevant to me when I was two, and my mother suffered an ischemic stroke, a relatively rare neurological condition in a young adult like her. Luckily, she received medical attention early enough that her brain sustained no permanent damage, and today it's almost as if it never happened. I do not take for granted how fortunate I am to be able to forget that her stroke occurred; it is because of neuroplasticity and the hospital neurologists that this event seems so far in the rearview and like such a small bump in the road today. I failed to realize how utterly astonishing it was that the neurologists could tell from a simple scan what the long-term effects of and treatment for the stroke would be. Even if it is a standard occurrence in hospital settings, it is wondrous to me that someone can endure a lack of oxygen to their brain for an extended period of time, yet can be cured relatively easily in most cases. That sense of awe is why I believe I am drawn to the subject; the ability to think and dream and possess a capacity for hate and love seem like such mundane aspects of human

existence because we become so familiar with them. However, when I personally stopped to try to understand the how behind these apparently quotidian functions, I realized that I did not have even a simple comprehension of my own ability to perceive the world around me. Clearly, an integral reason for my eventual choice to pursue neuroscience stemmed from my own paucity of knowledge about the field.

My time at Notre Dame truly felt like an intersection of two previously parallel paths I explored throughout my first year of high school: a desire to expand my education and a latent interest in neuroscience. Through the Garwin Family Foundation, the University of Notre Dame's Summer Scholars program became the natural convergence of those two passions, and I am so grateful for the opportunity to experience where they met. The cliché of remarking that the university became a home away from home is not lost on me, but that is the most accurate way I can describe how completely and intimately I feel I clicked into place at my program. When in school, it is easy to be consumed by an obsession with grades, assignments, and deadlines to the point where learning seems like a means to an end; burnout becomes expected and working feels strenuous. Rarely has education felt less like an obligation than at my neuroscience program. My professors understood that we had all worked hard to earn our spots in the classroom, and they showed us the same respect and diligence we had portrayed throughout the application process. We were encouraged to be inquisitive and to pursue challenging topics and discussions. Early on, I found myself intimidated by the unique academic backgrounds possessed by my peers. Many of my classmates came from private schools and big cities, but I found that we were on a more level playing field than I had originally anticipated. Though some had more extensive backgrounds in psychology and biology, none had taken a course specific to the field of neuroscience, and I think our educational blank slates created an atmosphere of academic equality that was immensely refreshing. I was hugely fond of my class as a whole, and I think my professors will now always be a couple of my favorite people. Their passion for neuroscience was evident in their devotion to deepening our comprehension and their genuine excitement to be with us for the program. They cultivated a space where, for two weeks, no one was uncomfortable asking questions. I often hear riding a bike used as an analogy to convey how easily select skills come back to a person after remaining idle for an extended period of time. For me, my love for researching, writing, and going down rabbit holes returned to me like riding a bike. I think that establishing an environment where your curiosity is not extinguished is vital to growth as a student at any point in a person's educational journey. I am painfully aware that I have had moments in my life where my interests have plateaued, and any intellectual reading and research has been sustained by the desire to get an A on a test; I am so grateful to have had an experience that gave my efforts a purpose beyond themselves.

Additionally, the community of friends I built was incredible. I have always been decently outgoing, but I was anxious about meeting new people nonetheless. Before beginning my program, the Garwin alumni had emphasized that forming social relationships had been hugely beneficial to their enjoyment of their own programs, and I am very thankful I had that initial guidance, or else I worry I may have remained in that intuitively cautious and closed-off

state. I will forever cherish the academic advancement I feel I reaped from my time on campus, but without the friends who helped me through my homesickness, and sang karaoke with me even when we sounded terrible, and watched *Little Women* with me on an unfortunately small laptop screen, the memories would have been muted and lackluster. My experience was exceptional as a result of these experiences, not despite them.

Before applying to the Garwin Family Foundation, I think I labored under the preconceived notion that students from small, rural areas such as Southern Illinois were naturally less visible than students from larger cities and more prominent schools. When somebody asked me where I was from, I would respond that I was from Carterville, and when they were invariably unfamiliar with the location, I would add that we are around two hours from St. Louis and fundamentally in the middle of nowhere. This repeated sentiment felt like a reflection of the perspective I had unconsciously formed about my hometown. I had never felt trapped or suffocated in Southern Illinois in the quintessential teenager way, but it was difficult to not feel limited in such a small environment. I simply considered myself, my small school, and my rural community remarkably unremarkable compared to the academies and skyscrapers many of my friends were accustomed to. Receiving a scholarship from the Garwin Foundation was the catalyst for an immense paradigm shift for me; it was a transformative opportunity that I was only able to explore because of my area. For one of the first times, my background no longer felt like a limiting factor in my educational journey. During my first week at Notre Dame, my program hosted an admissions session for any students interested in applying. It was essentially a large Q&A, and one of the panelists worked specifically with recruiting students from small, rural areas. When I asked the panel a question, I mentioned being from Southern Illinois, and the women truly seemed ecstatic to have our area represented. In that moment, I was unexpectedly proud of my hometown.

My time at the University of Notre Dame was nothing short of extraordinary. It confirmed that my curiosity deserves to be pursued, and it displayed the profound educational impact of learning when it is driven by wonder rather than obligation. I am deeply grateful to the Garwin Family Foundation for enabling me to rediscover and reclaim my passion for academic exploration, and I hope to carry the perspective and confidence I acquired this summer into every stage of my education.