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The youngest Black person to be accepted to medical school spent the summer in Baltimore. Here's what she learned.

By Alecia Taylor
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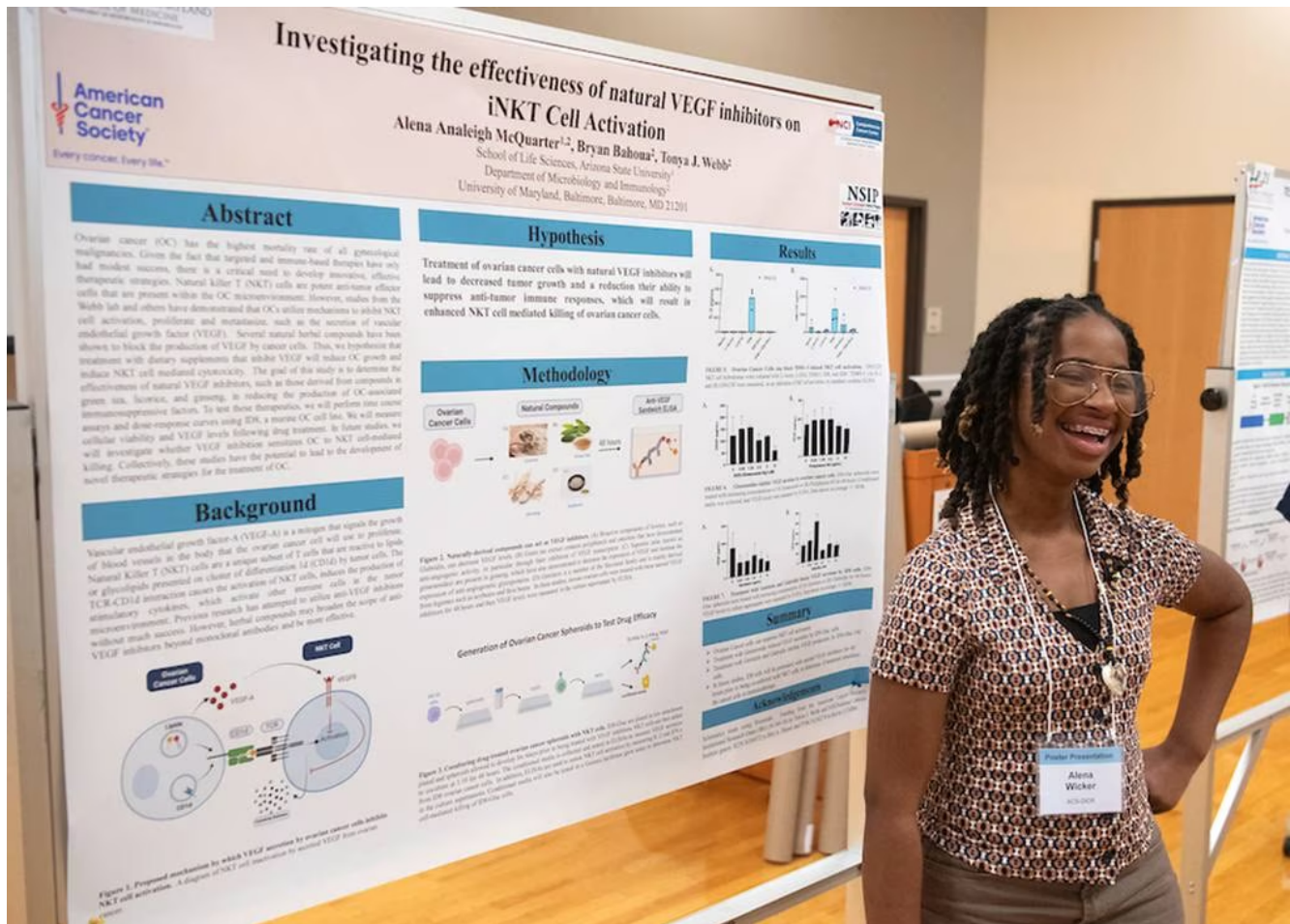
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Alena McQuarter, who interned at University of Maryland Marlene and Stewart Greenebaum Comprehensive Cancer Center, gives a presentation at the end her internship. (University of Maryland School of)

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At 13 years old Alena McQuarter became the youngest African-American — reportedly the youngest ever — to be accepted to medical school last summer. Now 14, she's currently a junior at Arizona State University studying Biosciences and will graduate later this year.

This summer she spent 11 weeks researching ovarian cancer cells with Dr. Tonya Webb, at the University of Maryland Marlene and Stewart Greenebaum Comprehensive Cancer Center in Baltimore.

“It was very, very inspiring to me seeing Dr. Webb in the lab, having her own lab, which I know is like a very big responsibility,” Alena said. Dr. Webb was not only Alena’s supervisor, but also her mentor. Every day Alena was met with a Black woman with dreadlocks just like hers, who shared her interests, including diversifying the world of medical research.

“She worked really, really hard. She came in and was able to read papers, scientific articles, and then worked on a project involving ovarian cancer,” said Dr. Webb, the assistant director of inclusion, diversity, equity, and accessibility at UMGCCC. “Cancer disproportionately affects people of color. And so we need people from underrepresented groups working in this field.”

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Alena was one of eight interns for the American Cancer Society's diversity in cancer research program. Usually, workers in the lab must be at least 16, so the University of Maryland School of Medicine had to go through extra steps for Alena's approval. One of her projects included creating a 3-D model that allowed her to see how ovarian cancer grows and how to possibly treat cancer cells.



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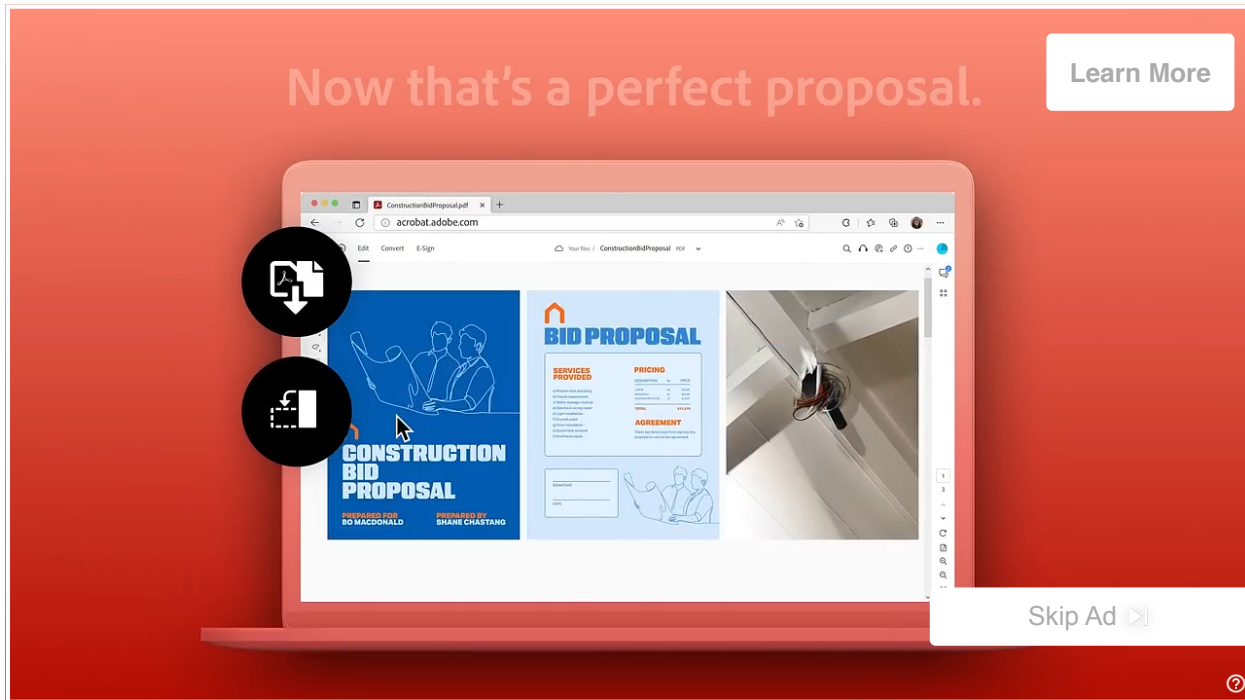
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"I spent lots of time learning what [vascular endothelial growth factor] was," Alena said. "After going through it, I really understood what it was and how ovarian cancer cells needed to grow, because if they don't have it, they can shrink and die."

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Alena and Dr. Webb were able to grow more than just cancer cells. Although Alena is back in Arizona and Dr. Webb is still here in Baltimore, during a video interview their chemistry could still be seen through their laughing and joking about Alena’s experience in Baltimore.

“The world is wide open. You can do whatever you want. The DMV area is fantastic. And yes, we would love to have you back,” Webb said to Alena during the interview. “[But do] what’s going to take your career to the next level.”

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After her summer in Baltimore, Alena's schooling plans are in flux. She is currently planning to get her Ph.D. in Viral Immunology focusing on infectious disease and possibly Cancer immunology, but she's keeping her options open. Although she is originally from Fort Worth, Texas, her mother, Daphne McQuarter, said wherever Alena chooses to enroll, the family will pick up and move with her.

"At this point I'm applying to a lot of different places, really keeping my options open. And this has given me this really big possibility," Alena said.

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So far, she's has been accepted to the University of Alabama Heersink School of Medicine.

Working in the lab has nurtured Alena's passion for diversity. She recently started her own foundation, "Brown STEM Girls" to get more girls of color engaged in science, technology, engineering and math.



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