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Coffee, Drag Queens, and Mobile Labs

Coffee churned in my stomach as I walked up the steps and entered the mobile lab. As someone who thrives on predictability, this was one of the few times I was entering a situation where I didn't know what to expect, and was doing so willingly. As a marketing and communications intern, my job this week was to observe Learning Undefeated's Emerging Leaders in STEM program and immerse myself in it. There was no way for me to have known that this initial discomfort (after all, I was a humanities major walking into a STEM lab) would transform into something else by the end of the week. On Friday, I'd find myself sad to leave, equipped with new knowledge and friendships. However, on Monday, those results felt far away and unattainable.

That first morning, students began meandering in, some walking in pairs already well acquainted, and others alone, looking almost as lost as I imagine I was. Name tags were put on, lab coats grabbed, and tables claimed before Benedetta, Learning Undefeated's Director of Education and this week's program leader, kicked off camp. She wasted no time jumping into an icebreaker (and boy did we need it, if I so much as shuffled the whole room could have heard the scuff of my shoes); Drosophila Gene, Town Name, or Drag Queen. While I didn't know what Drosophila was (for anyone else wondering, it's a fruit fly), I have watched enough RuPaul's Drag Race to feel like maybe, just maybe, I could find myself on an even playing field with the Emerging Leaders. The volume in the room began to slowly rise, and unfamiliar faces began talking to each other for the first time that day. As the game continued, it became evident that competition wasn't something to be feared for this group but rather something to be ignored. Collaboration became the focus as conversations were had over possible answers. The theme of

teamwork remained an important pillar throughout the day as students began helping one another with micropipetting, exploring the process together, and sharing previous knowledge and experience.

Going into day two, coffee was still in hand, but my nerves had lessened. In just a single session, the Emerging Leaders and Learning Undefeated team members had cultivated a space where everyone involved felt empowered to ask questions, make mistakes, and try new things; something Benedetta continually encouraged. “I let you guys make mistakes, but that's okay,” she said. “You’re not gonna learn anything just following directions.” For a bunch of students who had been used to perfection and correctness being the goal, Benedetta’s words created a collective deep breath throughout the room, and with a little more coaxing, the mobile lab became more relaxed. Students who were there on the first day began helping those who had just arrived on day two, laughter and debate over the newest episodes of Love Island erupted, selfies were taken, and Instagram usernames were shared. This newfound peace may be why by day three, the week’s halfway mark, everyone seemed oddly calm (dare I say even excited) about working with E coli for a DNA extraction activity. This lab would take up the remaining three days of the Emerging Leaders experience and it was here that the relationships the students had formed would become crucial. Rather than asking Benedetta questions they began to rely more on one another as they learned how to denature DNA, use PCR, and do transformations.

In stark contrast to day one, by day five, the lab was filled with chatter as students concluded their experiments and noted their results while waiting for the end-of-camp pizza lunch to arrive. Many empty pizza boxes later, Benedetta handed participants certificates to show their participation in the camp and encouraged them that despite everything happening in the

world, they shouldn't let that discourage them from pursuing science. "If you can't do it here," she said, "go do it some place else."

As students began to trickle out of the mobile lab for the last time that week, I found myself feeling sad that it was over. Despite initial fears that I would be left out of place due to not being in the sciences, I was met with such kindness. Every Emerging Leader showed me patience and was more than happy to answer any questions I had about what they were doing, why, and the process behind it. To me, this showed more than anything that they all truly fit the title of an Emerging Leader in STEM that was given to them. Knowledge is important, and no doubt they had loads, but their ability to explain information well and with compassion solidified to me that they all have promising futures as pioneers in the sciences. This experience wasn't the one I was expecting, and for that I am grateful because on day one I would have never imagined I'd be leaving knowing what a *Drosophila* Gene is, getting to witness the transformation of DNA, and having new friends to keep up with on Instagram.