ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT: Adam de la Zerda

Research Science Institute 2002
Assistant Professor, Departments of Structural Biology & Electrical Engineering
School of Medicine, Stanford University

By Abby Mitchell, Communications Manager, Center for Excellence in Education
May 10, 2016

Adam de la Zerda, Assistant Professor,
Department of Structural Biology & Electrical Engineering, School
of Medicine, Stanford University

What is your favorite memory of attending the Center for Excellence in Education's (CEE) Research Science Institute (RSI) in 2002?

When I look back on my time with RSI, I think about this important moment – it's this moment that changed my life. I remember when we had a lecture about quantum physics, and it was phenomenal. I was interested in engineering, and I thought my undergraduate would be in engineering. However, this lecture about quantum physics changed that. I talked to the presenter after and thanked him. I wanted to learn more. I thought, **"This is what I want to do. I want to teach physics at that level."** I asked questions, and fell in love with the topic.

The other most memorable time at RSI, is when our group took a trip from Boston to New Haven. We went on a hike, and walked along the tree line and it was a great view. There is such a prenominal group of students at RSI, so interesting and fun. It was so fun going on a trip like this, outside the classroom. I will never forget these two moments.

How did your experience at CEE help you both professionally and personally?

I was an international student from Israel, so this was the first time I really spent time at an American university. After RSI, I decided that I would be back in America for grad school – I would make it happen. I attended Stanford University for Electrical Engineering for my graduate degree and fell in love with San Francisco and the Bay area. Attending Stanford changed my career and life, so **coming to RSI in 2002 – it changed my life.**

Adam de la Zerda at RSI in 2002 in New Haven, CT

RSI affected me personally as well. Being a high school student, when I went to RSI, it was the first time I was away from home. Being away from your parents and your family, it allowed me to become a lot more mature. I

was given this important task, was surrounded by phenomenal students, had an amazing mentor, and stayed at MIT, an outstanding university, so I thought, "I had to make it work."

Attending RSI humbles you. The students that get accepted into RSI, are the top of their schools or, "the best of the best." So, attending a program where everyone is outstanding – it makes you feel small, but at the same time, it is the most inspiring experience. It gave me the boost to work hard, and ultimately make it all worth it.

Describe the importance of getting involved in STEM opportunities at a young age.

CEE is a phenomenal organization, and is a STEM organization that is impacting so many kids every year. The importance of STEM opportunities from a world perspective: If students think back to 50 years ago, to a time when their parents were students, and think about what the world was like for them growing up. Then think about the world that they live in today – **the new medical advances, incredible opportunities, it's all due to the advancement in STEM research**. It's such a different world!

Now think about the possibilities of what the world will look like in 50 years, when their kids are growing up. Those advances in the world are because of the hard work that was put in so many years ago. **STEM students make change**.

Adam de la Zerda with his 2002 RSI classmates

STEM opportunities from an individual perspective: getting involved in STEM opportunities at a young age is not only fun, fulfilling, and inspiring, but it's a peek inside the world of an actual STEM career. Having an internship as a graduate, even as an undergraduate, it becomes too late to really know what each career path is really like. Getting involved with CEE, I was given that early look during my time in high school. I thought I wanted to study network engineering. I really thought that's what I was most interested in. However, when I attended RSI, when I heard the lecture about quantum physics, I realized physics to me was far more interesting than I thought. I thought I could really change the world through quantum physics. I realized I can use these STEM concepts to make something new. **Programs like CEE, give you the opportunity to see what it's like on the other side of STEM and allow you to make a better decision about your future.**

There are so many cool things that STEM students can do, and with RSI you can take that true peek inside this world, and make better decisions for the future. It is one of the hardest things at that age to pick a major, and it is extremely important. With opportunities like CEE's programs, you can make an informed decision that hopefully allows you to pursue a career that you love.