A WISE chance for Lower Hudson teens to meet the real world

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Ricky Guerzon has a knack for organizing events.

The 18-year-old Nyack High School senior is usually the one who puts on the club fundraisers for the organizations where he’s a member.

So this year, forgoing the traditional senior slump, he’s ramped up his event planning skills and gone public, instead of attending his last-period English class.

He is putting together a community race in memory of a coach who recently died. And for this, he’ll receive credit for English without stepping foot in class.

"I think everybody should be able to have this opportunity," he said. "It forces you to be able to manage your time wisely. I think it will definitely pay off."

Guerzon is participating in the Wise Individualized Senior Experience program, an initiative created in 1973 to allow high school seniors a chance to use their interests to expand their school experience.

The nonprofit organization, run by retired educators, now has programs in nearly 80 high schools in a half-dozen states and is holding its annual conference at Scarsdale High School on Friday.

"It's not an internship program, although sometimes the students do internships on it," said Linda Greene, who has brought WISE to dozens of schools over the years. "It's built around their passions and interests. Students chose a project and teacher-mentor and they work on it one-on-one. They get school credit - usually English or social studies - and each school sets it up individually."

Schools "treat high school seniors like we do high school freshmen," she said. "These kids are going out in the world and every decision has been made for them. Especially in this day and age, when we as parents do literally everything for our kids, there's no 'sink or swim' for these kids until they get to college."

WISE tries to prepare seniors for a world that expects them to think for themselves, plan for themselves, set their own deadlines - and stick to them - and sell themselves to a potential employer.

The students are expected to create a project, write up a plan that is approved by their teacher-mentor, find a practical anchor for the project, journal their experience, do in-depth research on it, present their project to their peers and educators, do the project, write about it and analyze it at the end. The writing, analysis and presentations are what usually qualify the student for English credit; the projects themselves can be seen as a crash course in civics or volunteer work for social studies (and volunteer) credit.

About 70 percent of the hundreds of students participating in WISE choose a project that revolves around a career choice, Greene said. They'll write a play, spend time in a dentist's or doctor's office, volunteer time with a political figure or teacher, set up a newsletter, do publicity for a non-profit, work with a scientist or create business cards.

The rest of the students dive into their hobbies. They'll take guitar lessons, Italian lessons, belly dancing, flight lessons, baking, car repair, scuba diving, scrapbooking, linguistics, piano lessons, mountain climbing or go-cart building.

Karen Azzevanno this year helped introduce WISE to Rockland Country Day School. She wanted her own children to be able to participate because the program fits with the philosophy of the private school, she said, but she knows from personal experience its worth.
She was a WISE student herself as a senior at Woodlands High School, the first school where WISE was introduced in the Lower Hudson Valley. The program began at Woodlands in 1973. She did her project in 1978.

"It was such an amazing opportunity, you would be crazy not to do it," she said. Her interest lay in audiology.

"I was at the New York School for the Deaf and it expanded to taking a sign language class. There were so many amazing projects. I think it's one of the most empowering experiences any 17- or 18-year-old kid could have. It was originally designed to be a transition-type thing (to go) from (being) a student to the real world instead of just going on to college and only being a student. With this, you have some real-world experience."

Not all the experiences are pleasant, Greene said. Some WISE students find out that they don't like what they're doing, which gives them a chance to change their career choices.

And then there's the almost universal complaint - via journal - when the students start looking for the practical part of their projects and find out that people don't always return phone calls.

As Greene said - WISE gives kids a glimpse of the real world. And most of them find it fascinating.

For more information on WISE, visit www.wiseservices.org.

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WISE schools

This is is a list of local schools participating in WISE. For more information about specific projects, visit www.wiseservices.org.