

Aspiring Speech-Language Pathologists Find Meaning at NJSHA Conference

LONG BRANCH, NJ — The future of any industry hinges on the innovation of the next generation. For the New Jersey Speech-Language-Hearing Association (NJSHA), leaders recognize their greatest assets are the young men and women who graduate from top universities in the state.

Many from the next generation were on hand at the recent NJSHA convention in Long Branch. They all cited various reasons for their career choice, but they all agreed they are entering the field to make a real difference.

“In our field, if you work with kids, you’re giving them certain skills for the first time,” said Emily Lane, a graduate student at Montclair State University. “If you work with adults, you’re helping them regain a skill that they lost.”

As an undergraduate, Lane knew she wanted to help kids grow. When she decided teaching was not for her, she began to explore other options.

She then met a speech-language pathologist who spoke highly of the profession. Lane soon realized she had found her calling.

Now nearing the end of her first year of graduate school, she volunteers at an adult care facility where she helps people who have trouble swallowing.

Speech-language pathology will offer Lane a chance to continue aiding adults. But she can also pivot to working with children. That versatility is important to her.

“There’s unlimited opportunity,” she said.

Her colleague, Kathryn Fuentes, also likes that her budding career will enable her to help people of all ages and from all backgrounds. While she has assisted stroke victims in the past, she intends to switch to early intervention, which means she would work with children who are 3 years old and younger.

“My early motivation came from friends who said speech-language pathology is interesting and meaningful,” Fuentes said. “Once I got into the program and saw what it entailed, I knew I’d be able to help people, and I loved that.”

The inner workings of speech-language pathology are a draw for some.

When Larry McDonald enrolled in the graduate program at Kean University in Union Township, he was most interested in the blend of language and science. Intriguing coursework and unique clinical opportunities furthered his enthusiasm.

“The research is always moving forward,” he said. “At the NJSHA conference, you learn about research that will be in textbooks 10 years from now.”

Having now seen the helpful nature of employers and the camaraderie of the community, McDonald is even more motivated to enter the field.

Everyone should have the right to communicate. That’s why Dana Bartone, another Kean University graduate student, is on her way to becoming a speech-language pathologist.

While working at a camp, she supervised a little boy who didn’t speak. He eventually used a specialized device to better connect with his peers and elders. That breakthrough served as a revelation for Bartone.

“I saw firsthand that speech-language pathology works,” she said. “It really does help people.”

For these up-and-coming professionals, the only uncertainty that remains is how, exactly, they will leave their mark.

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