Q&A with Jan Zverina

Jan Zverina is SDSC’s Executive Director of External Relations, a department responsible for overseeing press releases about SDSC research and resources, maintaining the SDSC website, producing an annual report and bi-monthly newsletter, and running event management — among other duties. This summer, he is mentoring two students in a Science Writing and Video Communications internship, marking his fifth year with REHS. “His fascinating background brings a wonderful diversity to the program,” said Ange Mason, SDSC’s education manager and REHS founder. “The students benefit tremendously from his comprehensive depth of knowledge.”

Zverina is also part of the external relations team for XSEDE, an organization funded by the National Science Foundation that coordinates advanced digital services with researchers nationally. A former news journalist, he has worked for United Press International and founded one of the first Bloomberg Business News Bureaus. Zverina joined SDSC in 2007.

Q: How did you come to join SDSC?

I used to work within the automotive industry for Chrysler Corporation. I was in charge of media communications for all the new vehicles that we would launch. Since we were in Detroit and it was the winter months, we always liked to go to nice, warm places to do vehicle drives. Two of our favorite places were Austin, Texas and San Diego. I brought my wife and kids out to San Diego one February when it was about three degrees in Detroit, and they said, “Oh, we could see ourselves here for a while.” Then, since my son was starting high school, we thought, “Now’s the time to make a move.”
In his profession, Zverina is typically the interviewer, not interviewee. At times such as the following, I observed him slipping back into his customary role, often taking my next question from the tip of my tongue.

You might ask, “What kind of science writing experience did I have coming in?”

When I was in the car industry, that was the time when auto designers and engineers were first using computer-aided technology to design cars. They were doing visualizations, just like we do on Comet, our supercomputer. Instead of building a car and seeing if the parts fit, they were doing it in cyberspace. That gave me a lot of technical writing background, which came to bear on the kind of complex research that we do here.

Q: Can you briefly describe the project that your two students will be working on this summer?

They produce two videos, one each, on a subject of their choice with a researcher based here at SDSC. Jon Lou, our videographer, will take them through that, but they get to interview the researcher, direct, and produce the video. That video is only two minutes long. The focus is to take a complex issue and answer three questions. As a viewer, why should I care about this? What’s the benefit to science? What’s the benefit to society? If they can answer those within two minutes with a video that’s compelling and makes you say, “Wow that was really cool! I want to see another video from SDSC,” then we did our job.

Q: What are the greatest takeaways you hope your students will gain from this experience?

I think REHS is a real eye-opening experience. During these eight weeks, they develop a different approach to how they look at writing. One of the biggest things is brevity, the economy of words. It’s writing clearly, concisely, and without being overly verbose. I give my students this book [On Writing Well, by William Zinsser]. I tell them, “I guarantee you that you will keep this book probably throughout your university years and somewhere close to when you have a job.” And I encourage them to get back to me after this session is over. I like to know what they’re doing.

Q: In what ways have you found mentorship most valuable?

It’s very rewarding to be able to do this. It’s like giving back. I remember when I was 17 years old, I didn’t know what I wanted to do, so I really like Ange’s approach to getting students interested at the middle school, junior, and senior levels. Those are the formative years when you ask, “Is this really something I’m interested in?” Occasionally, there are students who have found out they don’t like science writing and would rather be an English major. That’s success to me. They found out what they didn’t want to do, and that’s as important as finding out what you want to do. When you think about scientific research, the majority of scientific research is actually finding out that it doesn’t work the way you want it to.

TIDBITS: Over the course of our conversation, I also learned that Jan Zverina…

⇒ is a nationally certified judge and member of the San Diego Jaguar Club,
⇒ is a Gemini,
⇒ and double majored in business journalism and anthropology!

Image credit: SDSC StudentTECH
Q: Your involvement with your school newspaper and Science Olympiad provide a strong background for your work in science writing and video communications this summer. Can you expand on your path from those extracurriculars to this internship?

This internship does a great job in combining those two main passions of mine. I became interested in newspaper in my freshman year. Now, I’m an entertainment editor starting next year. On the side, I also compete. I submitted to one writing competition, the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards, and got a Silver Key, so I was proud of that achievement. Generally, I’m really interested in writing, so I also want to start a creative writing club next year. I’m interested in science, too, which is why I became a head coach for Meadowbrook Middle School’s Science Olympiad team. When I was in middle school, my own team ranked ninth nationally, so I decided to continue into high school and teach other people what I’ve learned.

Q: Do you plan to pursue writing and/or computational science after you graduate?

I’m not sure yet. I’m keeping my options open, but this internship will be a great experience and allow me to gain exposure to possible job opportunities in the science writing and journalism fields.

Q: Can you talk a bit about what you’re working on right now?

We are compiling a two-minute video about an SDSC researcher’s topic. The point of this is to help us learn how to produce a video, how to interview someone correctly, and how to compile information concisely. This is because the general public often has a hard time understanding complex scientific topics. This is a good way to practice putting these complex science terms into simple terms so that other people can understand.

Q: When you’re not working here at SDSC, how do you spend your summer days?

I’m taking an SAT prep class right now, but I jog every day. And I hang out with friends or read in my free time. I also like drawing and taking hip hop classes at my local studio.

Meet Devina Tavathia

A rising junior at Mount Carmel High School, Devina Tavathia is one of two REHS students mentored by SDSC Executive Director of External Relations Jan Zverina in a Science Writing and Video Communications internship. During the academic year, she writes for her school newspaper, the MC Sun; coaches a local middle school’s Science Olympiad (an academic competition with events in various scientific disciplines, such as physics, biology, etc.) team; and is on the school track and soccer teams.

Q: What initially attracted you to apply to the REHS program?

I actually first heard about REHS from another classmate, but then I really looked into it, saw how many projects there were, and thought it would be a great opportunity.
REHS Kicks Off!

With the beginning of summer vacation, the majority of the student body has departed to enjoy their break away from the UC San Diego grounds. However, just as the hallways have hollowed out, high school students participating in the Research Experience for High School Students (REHS) are flooding into SDSC.

Kicking off its 10th year, the internship program began on June 17th and will run until August 9th. It provides an invaluable opportunity for high school students to explore a potential career interest, to gain work readiness skills and hands-on research experience, and to receive mentoring from computational research scientists.

When SDSC Education Manager Ange Mason created REHS in 2010, it took in only 22 students over a six-week period. Since then, the program has grown tremendously, now accepting 40 to 60 participants each year for an eight-week internship.

Selected from a pool over 200 applications, these students spend 15-25 hours per week at the Center working on an impressive diversity of research projects. Topics span from the development of interactive Jupyter notebooks for SDSC high-performance computing systems to the analysis of brain activity from electroencephalography (EEG) and magnetoencephalography (MEG) data to elucidate ultradian rhythms in sleep.

To learn more about individual research projects, visit https://goo.gl/fzU3KB.

10 years of REHS has seen over 400 students come through, and the program is looking forward to another decade of growth and success.

Take a Break...