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Genetics takes center stage at Regina

*Rob Daniel
Iowa City Press-Citizen*

A lot can be learned from the genetic makeup of a person.

It is one of the lessons Regina High science teacher Barb Reilly said she hopes to pass on to her general science students.

"I always want the kids to know what's going on in real life," she said.

Part of the lessons will be those Reilly learned at the Geneticist-Educator Network of Alliances, or GENA, project Aug. 4 to 7 at the Montclair State PRISM facility in Montclair, N.J. Established by the American Society of Human Genetics and funded by the National Science Foundation, the GENA project works to certify biology teachers to improve the teaching of genetics over the course of a year.

Much of that revolves around the teachers being located near a research facility. In Reilly's case, she is working with geneticist Jeff Murray at the University of Iowa to develop her class' curriculum.

For Reilly's classes, that means delving into their own family history. Her general science classes, comprised of freshmen, for example, will do family questionnaires on their family health history. The questions will touch on what family members have had conditions such as heart illness before the age of 60 and those who have battled diseases such as diabetes and cancer.

"Right away, they think of the things that are observable," she said.

Reilly said she plans to order a genetic testing kit that is more readily available than before to teach her students. She said she hopes to incorporate the lessons of how lifestyle choices can help determine whether certain illnesses such as cancer or diabetes can become less of a reality for them even if they have a family history of them.

"What we want the kids to see is not just that," she said. "It's how you live your life. We want them to be good consumers and not buy into the trend."
