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FEATURED

## Marion County student has planned her future

By DENNIS GEORGE [dgeorge@lebanonenterprise.com](mailto:dgeorge@lebanonenterprise.com)

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Erika Hoppes is a semifinalist for a Science Math and Research for Transformation scholarship from the Department of Defense.

Most high school students have no idea what they will be doing a week from now, much less what road they want to travel in their lives.

It takes just a short conversation with Marion County senior Ericka Hoppes to realize she is not like most of her counterparts.

She will be the first to admit it wasn't that long ago that she was a happy-go-lucky student.

Since the beginning of her junior year, she has been attending The Gatton Academy on the campus of Western Kentucky University.

“I didn't really know much about the academy at all before applying,” she said. “I just saw something that the school had posted about the deadline being extended and it sounded kind of cool. I thought it would be a two-week camp or something.”

Instead, it has been two years of taking classes on the same college campus she plans on attending. Because all of the high school students attending the academy live in the same dorm, there is not a lot of social interaction with the college students.

“The social life for me wasn’t what it could have been because I was more focused on the education, not the social interaction,” Hoppes said. “This has been so incredible for me and just a great experience.”

Students in the academy are required to take some type of science class. She listed computer science, chemistry, and biology as some of the choices.

“We are also allowed to take some electives so I am studying psychology classes because that is what I want to major in when I finish this,” Hoppes said. “I want to get my master’s and then my Ph.D. in psychology as well.”

She is well on her way to achieving that goal.

Hoppes will have 81 hours of college credit when she gets her high school diploma. Western has awarded her enough scholarship money to pay for the rest of her education. That takes some pressure off of Hoppes, but she is already eyeing something even bigger.

Hoppes is a semifinalist for a Science Math and Research for Transformation (SMART) scholarship from the Department of Defense. If selected, the DOD will pay for her education and also give her a stipend for each year she is working toward her degree.

“Each summer that you take the scholarship you will do an internship with the Department of Defense at whatever facility that you are placed at,” she explained. “After you finish your college education, you will work for the Department of Defense for every year that you took the scholarship.”

She is taking a different path getting into the world of the Department of Defense than her siblings. Her older brother and sister are members of the United States Coast Guard.

“I do want to help others and this SMART scholarship gave me a little bit more ambition to do that because it funded my schooling for me,” she said. “With it, I can work for the Department of Defense while still pursuing my initial degree and get the education I want and maybe even open another door to federal government jobs for me.”

The scholarship winners will not be announced until sometime in April but Hoppes isn't spending her days fretting over her chances. With her education paid for, she is going about her daily life.

“I'm hoping for the best but I'm not expecting to get it because expectations can only let you down,” she said. “I still have backup plans even if it doesn't work out in the way that I want. I could get an internship with the Department of Homeland Security in Bowling Green. I feel like the academy and the SMART scholarship are benefiting me right now. It gives me a long-term goal.”