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A shining light: BC student's goal is a cancer-free society

By **DON CONKEY**
Patriot Ledger staff

Elizabeth O'Day hopes that someday people will just head to a pharmacy with a prescription when they find out they have cancer.

And if she isn't the one to personally make that day arrive, O'Day is hoping someone she's influenced along the way will be.

"I've always said that the legacy I leave will not be the inhibitors or the drugs I have made," O'Day said. "The legacy will be the people that I had a chance to interact with."

O'Day, a 2002 graduate of Braintree High School, has be-

come one of Boston College's undergraduate shining lights in the field of cancer research.

The 22-year-old senior has won four of the nation's most coveted awards for her scientific research efforts.

As a sophomore, O'Day earned a Beckman Scholarship, which funds intensive research experiences for exceptional undergraduates.

As a junior, she received a Goldwater Scholarship, considered the premier undergraduate science fellowship, and was chosen to present her research at the Euroregionale Conference of the American Chemical Society German Exchange Program in Berlin.

This year O'Day was awarded a Winston Churchill Scholarship to study at Cambridge University in England, and a National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship.

O'Day is studying cell enzymes that she hopes will contribute to the development of a new class of inhibitors that, in turn, may lead to a new class of anticancer drugs.

"I believe there will be a time when someone will get cancer and just take a pill and it will be all set," O'Day said.

"Equally important, I know that I cannot accomplish it myself. It may be the next generation coming along that gets it done."

That in mind, she is doing what she can to make sure that science isn't losing potential young female difference-makers to apathy or self-doubt.

O'Day said that after returning home from Berlin last spring, she was asked to speak at Fontbonne Academy in Milton, where her mother, Marjory O'Day, is director of campus ministry.

"I told them what I did, and afterward some girls came up to me and said things like, 'I can't believe what you do in science,' and 'I don't get science.' I was disappointed to learn that many of the girls found science to be too boring or difficult," she said.

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Aspiring cancer researcher Elizabeth O'Day of Braintree has won five of the nation's most coveted academic awards for science research.

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Rather than leave things at that, O'Day decided to take action.

She designed and launched an initiative at BC called "Women in Science and Technology," bringing girls from Fontbonne Academy, Braintree High School and Trinity Catholic High School in Newton to the college for research, lectures, field excursions and the opportunity to meet mentors and role models across scientific disciplines.

About 30 girls participated, most of them juniors, meeting on Saturdays throughout February.

"The goal was that they get the idea that they could do science, and make it their career," O'Day said.

It may be years before O'Day knows who, if anyone, used that program as a springboard into a successful science career.

But she knows it was worth the effort.

"People have asked me how it feels to be a female biochemist. I've never considered myself to be some kind of special example, never noticed it to be any different to be a girl and a scientist," O'Day said.

"It would be nice to know that I helped other girls feel that way."

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