

# Shea excels at THINK Summer Institute

## GIFTED STUDENTS JOIN TOGETHER IN RENO

**BY MATT SANDERSON**  
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PUTNAM — An intellectually gifted Putnam teen received his first taste of the college experience last month while participating in the THINK Summer Institute at the University of Nevada, Reno campus.

Connor Shea, 13, was one of two youths from Connecticut who enrolled in the three-week program, which provided 60 talented students ages 13-16 from around the country to become fully immersed in the college experience. Students earned college credits by taking a course of their choice, varying from human development, public health biology, computer science, statistics, philosophy, nanotechnology and micro technology.

The THINK Summer Institute is one of several

educational services offered by the Davidson Institute for Talent Development at the Reno campus.

“It was unique, challenging and fun,” said Shea. “I learned a lot. It was pretty structured, and a bit fast-paced.”

Supervised by THINK staff members 24 hours a day, students stayed in the university’s dorms. Tuition is \$2,700, which covers room, board, course credits and the cost of planned program activities. Additionally, participants were responsible for textbooks, transportation to and from the program and pocket money. In order to qualify, students applying must have a minimum scored performance on the SAT or ACT, depending on whether those applying are currently enrolled in

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*Matt Sanderson photo*

**Connor Shea, 13, of Putnam, recently completed a three-week academic course load at the THINK Summer Institute at the Davidson Institute at the University of Nevada Reno campus. The program is for youths ages 13-16 who are profoundly gifted.**

# Putnam teen excels at THINK Institute

## SHEA

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the high school or middle school level. They also needed two letters of recommendation and to provide an essay explaining why they chose their particular courses for the summer program.

Students chose courses that honed to their skill sets; Shea took on computer science and statistics.

"I've been interested in computers for awhile," he said. "I learned a lot about programming using Java, C++, HTTP and all different languages. Some I had never heard of."

In statistics, Shea said the course went "a lot deeper" than one would think.

"There's so many different ways to manipulate stats to what you want," he said. "It's not just rolling the dice."

Students attended class twice a day during the three-week experience. Shea said the students were also treated by staff to a baseball game and the local cinema. But he said they spent most of their time in the dorms socializing, hanging out and studying together.

The backgrounds of every student attending the THINK Summer Institute were diverse, Shea added. Some students were homeschooled at some capacity, some were in public school and had skipped several grades and others were already in college.

Shea, who has been homeschooled since he was 6, realized early in life that he possessed

strong science and math skills in public school. In preschool and kindergarten, he would finish assignments well ahead of his classmates, so his teachers would provide him with additional work to keep him occupied while waiting for students to catch up. At that time, he was reading at a fourth-grade level.

"My teacher realized I was doing work way beyond, and they kept me working separately," he said about his experience in the public school setting.

For those considering the THINK Summer Institute, Shea advises to study a lot and allow enough time to get homework done as soon as possible.

"So it doesn't pile up," he added.

Michael E. Leverington, computer science teacher at THINK Summer Institute, said all participants have an incredible work ethic and "do a great job of wading through all the work we give them in a pretty short time." He instructed students to write several response and reaction papers related to computer science and technological conditions.

"Their written responses are thoughtful and well developed, as are their verbal responses in the classroom when we discuss the topics," he said via e-mail. "We built computers, studied programming at several different levels, soldered some electronic music devices together, studied some algorithmic operations, built some robots and more."

Leverington, who completed his fourth year teaching in the program, said students came to every class with an interest in seeing where they would go next. He said he enjoys seeing students step up to the challenges presented to them.

"I also give a final exam that specifically addresses some analysis and synthesis level thinking, and this year's group did better than any group I have taught in this class before," he added.

Leverington said he had a good time watching Shea work on their sound analysis lab and study their algorithm tasks.

"But my favorite thing about watching and working with him was as he was trying to get his robot to create a specific path on the floor," he said. "He put quite a bit of effort and thought into that, and his robot did very well."

Leverington noted that overseeing these young and gifted minds is a reassuring feeling.

"From a personal perspective, knowing that these students are coming up and heading for our universities and industries keeps me optimistic that we have some capable young minds moving into the leadership and management of our future," he said.

Jill Adrian, director of the THINK Summer Institute, said students who completed the program receive two credits for two college courses.

"He's a great kid, and profoundly gifted," she said about Shea.

"They really take the opportunity. They are not only academically challenged, but they are [also] with like-minded peers in an environment with other individuals who can banter back and forth."

She said the THINK Summer Institute forces students to learn time management and study skills at an earlier age.

"The program itself is very rigorous," added Adrian. "It's pretty fantastic. For some students it's a steep learning curve in that regard, but they also really learn to have confidence and those important skills that will last a lifetime. Some had to learn how to do laundry."

Aside from his rigorous academic workload at home, Shea, who has an older brother in college and two younger sisters who are also homeschooled, currently takes two chemistry courses and one pre-calculus course at Quinebaug Valley Community College in Danielson. This fall, he plans to take a calculus course at Worcester Polytechnic Institute.

Shea is also participating in self-paced online courses with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He recently completed a course on Greek history.

He is also involved with the Boy Scouts and martial arts. For his Eagle Scout community service project, Shea wants to start an online advocacy blog for young people to stay interested in science and math careers.

Currently, Shea is leaning toward a career in chemistry.

At home, Shea's mother Lorel facilitates his academic work online, where he has recently taken courses in calculus, astronomy, theater and Latin.

He anticipates attending college before age 18.

"We're taking it year by year," said his mother. "My husband and I feel it is important for Connor to have a well-rounded childhood."

Mrs. Shea said a friend of Connor's attended the institute last summer. That sparked his interest in applying and attending this year.

"It was a big experience," she added. "It was his first time traveling across the country by himself. I don't think he's ever challenged himself at this level."

Former educational software entrepreneurs turned philanthropists Bob and Jan Davidson founded the Davidson Institute in 1999 to support profoundly gifted students under the age of 18. They began a first-ever public school for the gifted in 2006 called the Davidson Academy, which is separate from the three-week THINK Summer Institute.

For more information, visit [www.DavidsonGifted.org](http://www.DavidsonGifted.org).

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