

At Geneva High, the nose knows

Students take part in pheromone research

By KEVIN DeVALK
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GENEVA — Can you identify your friends by their pheromones?

Students in two biology classes at Geneva High School recently attempted to find out.

The project was the idea of Shannon Olsson, a Cornell University graduate student who has been working with students in Joan Barnard's and Linda Turri's classes this year, but the students researched and developed the experiment themselves.

"They wanted to see if they could recognize themselves ... their friends ... their classmates," said Olsson.

Olsson, who is studying to become a professor, said there haven't been many studies done on whether friends can identify each other by their pheromones — chemicals secreted by animals and insects that can cause specific reactions in others of the same species in communicating messages about things such as food, territory and sex. Just how much of an influence pheromones have in humans, however, has been a matter of debate in the scientific community.

The Geneva High experiment was voluntary, though most students participated.

They had to adhere to a number of "controls." Each had to bathe before bedtime with the same soap and wear the same kind and size of T-shirt, for example. After sleeping in the shirts for three consecutive nights — saturating the fabric with their scent and natural chemical signatures, the shirts were then bagged and put into storage.

Later, the students were taken into a lab room individually, where five T-shirts were laid out on a counter, in bags identified only by number. One of the shirts was worn by a friend, and the students weren't told if their own shirt was among the others.

After that, it was time to put their noses to the test.

Senior Laura Fratangelo donned some latex gloves and then poked her nose into each bag, taking a long whiff.

Her goal? To find the one worn



Spencer Tulls / Finger Lakes Times

Senior Laura Fratangelo takes a whiff of a T-shirt as part of a Geneva High School biology experiment dealing with pheromones and their role in helping choose friends.

by her friend, Caitlin Pratt.

None of them smelled awful. One had a hint of cigarette. Actually, she said, picking one was hard because the odors were faint.

She jotted down some observations, and in the end made an educated guess. Unfortunately for her and the rest of her classmates, the results of their study won't be known until Thursday. Barnard, however, said many of the teens did correctly pick their

friend's shirt.

The experiment was easy, said senior Mike Moses. He added he had learned about pheromones in chemistry class, and when the experiment was developed, he was eager to participate.

If they can get permission from the district, the students will be eligible to present their data at a "Science Congress" for high school students in March at Cornell University. Then, in April, Olsson will present the results

at a conference of the Association for Chemoreception Sciences in Sarasota, Fla.

Moses said he found his friend's shirt right away but didn't think he found his own. And, while Fratangelo hoped she had sniffed out Pratt's shirt, Pratt amicably said she'll forgive her friend if she was wrong.

Either way, of course, the right one was under her nose all along.

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