



Media Release

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Judsonia teen who's visually impaired graduates from unique program

Mariah Brawley of Judsonia has succeeded in finishing Jump Start, a three-week career development program for high school students who are blind or severely visually impaired. She was among 21 students from across the state who were accepted into the program, which ran from June 9 – June 28 this summer.

Students learned skills to prepare them for life after high school. The DHS Division of Services for the Blind (DSB) placed students in part-time jobs in the mornings and had educational and recreational activities in the afternoons and evenings. This is the only program of its kind in Arkansas.

Arkansas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired has partnered with DSB to put on the program, sharing resources and opening up dorms. Participants stay on the ASBVI campus during the week and return home on the weekends.

Brawley said apart from having her first job, one of the most important parts of the program was “hanging out with other visually impaired people my own age. Before coming to Jump Start the only blind or visually impaired people I’d ever met were an elderly lady and a friend of my Dad.” Brawley will be age 17 in August and will be starting her junior year in high school.

To the degree possible, DSB placed students in jobs in their fields of interest, so they could gain insight into their chosen professions. Of course, some students didn’t have specific career goals at this point in their lives and were given other employment. Students can return to Jump Start in successive years and be placed in more advanced jobs as their experience grows.

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Brawley had no work experience, so she was placed at the Billy Mitchell Boys and Girls Club. “I thought it would be like a normal day care, but it was much more active,” she said. Boys and Girls Clubs have learning facilities, quiet places to do homework, tutoring, computer labs, gyms, exercise programs, and recreational activities. Brawley worked in the learning center and assisted Boys and Girls Club participants with the computers. She was also responsible for checking in and out the board games, Lego® blocks, and cards. Brawley said working and her other Jump Start experiences “gave me confidence in myself.”

“It’s been great. She’s a quick learner and a joy to work with. She came willing and ready to work. I’ll always do this program (be a Jump Start job site),” said Steven Riffle, Unit Director of the Billy Mitchell Boys and Girls Club.

In addition to job skills, Jump Start students learned independent living skills that many people without visual impairments take for granted, such as meal planning, cooking, clothing care, and money management. Students were taught computer skills and business and dining etiquette. Brawley said her favorite activity was touring Arkansas’ “beautiful State Capitol.” While there students received hands-on training on how to use accessible voting machines.

Learning how to live independently also means learning how to get around. Students received orientation and mobility training that teaches them how to travel using a white cane. They learned how to use city buses.

Students saw a play at Murry’s Dinner Playhouse, visited the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, and enjoyed a cookout at a park. Students toured Heifer International Headquarters, a non-profit which provides livestock to impoverished families and teaches them sustainable agricultural practices, and the Mosaic Templars Cultural Center, which focuses on Arkansas's African-American history and culture. At the end of the program, they had a graduation event.

Applications for the Jump Start program are taken in the early spring of each year and are available from DSB counselors and through the DSB website at <http://humanservices.arkansas.gov/dsb/Pages/default.aspx>. People also can call 1-800-960-9270 or 501-682-5463 for information.