



Media Release

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For Immediate Release

July 2, 2013

Shirley teen who's visually impaired graduates from unique program

Kristen Kuykendall of Shirley 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 in Little Rock during the week and return home on the weekends.

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. Although this was Kuykendall's first time in Jump Start, she was placed at the William J. Clinton Presidential Center.

"I just loved it there. It was my first job and my first paycheck. I earned my own money. I learned how to get a job and show up and work every day. I assisted the tour guides and gave information to people," said Kuykendall.

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Kuykendall had to miss her last night and day of Jump Start, but was allowed to graduate. She was heading to Anaheim, CA, for the national Future Business Leaders of America competition after placing second in state competition. During high school, she was also active in the Family Career Community Leaders of America club, served in various positions on the Student Council, was the school mascot for two years, and attended Governor's School last summer. She graduated as valedictorian at ASBVI in May. Kuykendall made an ACT score of 32 and plans to attend college in the fall.

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. Students also toured the State Capitol and received hands-on training using 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.

Working part-time and interacting with other students who are blind or visually impaired is an important part of the program because it increases the student's confidence, social skills and self-esteem. Social skills and interactions with others are a crucial part of life, so recreational activities are built into the program.

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.