



Media Release

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Little Rock, North Little Rock teens who are blind and visually impaired graduate from unique program

Seven students from Little Rock and North Little Rock have succeeded in finishing Jump Start, a three-week career development program for high school students who are blind or visually impaired. They were 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.

Students agreed the program taught them “independence”. 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.

Local students and their job assignments included: Gabriel Johnson and Quatisa “Tisa” Martin East, both of North Little Rock, the Arkansas Regional Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped; Anastacia Santacruz of North Little Rock, the law office of Peter Miller; Sedrick Wilkerson of North Little Rock, the ASBVI Instructional Resource Center; Andre “A.J.” Johnson of Little Rock, the Billy Mitchell Boys and Girls

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Club; and Starkesha “Star” Sims of Little Rock, the Arkansas Coalition Against Domestic Violence. ASBVI sponsored Saadriye Georce, a Turkish exchange student living in LR, who also participated in Jump Start activities.

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.