

Media Release

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Shurshawna Lewis of Fordyce stands with Art Director Jason Rogers in front of a sign for Mass Enthusiasm where she worked in a career development program sponsored by the Department of Human Services Division of Services for the Blind for students who are blind or visually impaired. DSB places students in part-time jobs in the mornings and offers educational and recreational activities in the afternoons and evenings.

Fordyce teen who's visually impaired completes unique program

Shurshawna Lewis of Fordyce was among the teens graduating from Jump Start, a career development program for high school students who are blind or severely visually impaired. The program, based in Little Rock, ran from June 5 – June 24.

Students are selected from applications taken in the early spring of each year and come from across the state to attend the unique program sponsored by the Department of Human Services Division of Services for the Blind (DSB) and the Arkansas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired (ASBVI).

DSB places students in part-time jobs in the mornings and offers educational and recreational activities in the afternoons and evenings. This is the only program of its kind in Arkansas and is designed to assist students in transitioning from high school to employment or post-secondary education and increase their confidence in social situations.

To the degree possible, students are placed in jobs in their fields of interest so they can gain insight into their chosen professions. Students who don't have specific career goals at this point in their lives are given other employment according to their experience, skills and abilities.

Lewis was placed as a social media trainee at Mass Enthusiasm, an advertising, marketing, digital media, and public relations company. She was given experience in the promotion, creative, and art departments. "It was fun. The company has the right name. They're all enthusiastic. It's been really nice."

"Shurshawna's awesome," said Jason Rogers, art director and her supervisor. She had Instagram, Snapchat and Photoshop tutorials. She worked on posters, learned the back side of Facebook, did promotional posts for the company, and worked on logos and coloring textures.

This was Shurshawna's second time to participate in Jump Start; she returned to gain more work experience. Last time she did clerical work for the Law Offices of Peter Miller.

"Jump Start was a lot of fun. It feels good to be around people who understand that, yes, I can't see as well as others, but I am still able. It's such a good opportunity," she said, explaining the work experience gave her a level playing field with others who aren't visually impaired. Before Jump Start, the teen didn't have any future plans, "because I didn't know I could until I came here and I learned that there were so many things that were here that could help me be all I could be."

Shurshawna and the other Jump Start students heard job information presentations from Goodwill Industries, Arkansas Lighthouse for the Blind, Easter Seals, and Medlinc, a medical training and staffing company. They toured the West Rock Coffee factory and World Services for the Blind, which offers several career training programs. Representatives from the University of Arkansas at Morrilton presented information about choosing a college, financial resources, and balancing campus life and studies. The students visited Central Baptist College in Conway.

Students toured the Arkansas Career Training Institute (ACTI), formerly known as the Hot Springs Rehabilitation Center. While in Hot Springs, they explored Garvan Woodland Gardens and rode on the Belle of Hot Springs Riverboat.

Jump Start students learned independent living skills that many people without visual impairments take for granted. They learned money management, banking, stress management techniques, self-advocacy, and meal planning. They participated in a cooking lesson with Chef Brian Kelly of Little Rock. Students received orientation and mobility training on how to travel using a white cane.

The students volunteered at Our House, an organization that provides shelter, training, and child care for people who are homeless or near homeless, and Arkansas Rice Depot, a statewide hunger and disaster relief organization.

Working part-time and interacting with other students who are blind or visually impaired increased the students' confidence, social skills and self-esteem. Some students who came from small communities had never met other teenagers who are blind or visually impaired. Social skills and interactions with others are a crucial part of life, so recreational activities were built into the program. Students went bowling, saw a movie, painted their own works of art, and saw a play at Murry's Dinner Playhouse.

After a class on business and dining etiquette, students practiced the skills they learned at Sonny Williams' Steak Room and Benihana Hibachi Grill.

Jump Start participants stayed on the ASBVI campus during the week and returned home on the weekends. At the end of the three-week program, there was a talent show and a graduation event held at the Ron Robinson Theater, part of the Central Arkansas Library System.

DSB provides vocational rehabilitation services to adults who are blind or severely visually impaired and whose goal is successful employment. The division also serves youth and older blind individuals. For information about DSB's programs and services, visit the DSB website at <http://humanservices.arkansas.gov/dsb/Pages/default.aspx> or call 1-800-960-9270, 501-682-5463, or TDD 501-682-0093.