

Media Release

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Fort Smith teen who's visually impaired completes unique program

Shateria Thompson of Fort Smith 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.

Thompson was placed as an activities assistant at the Highlands of Little Rock at Midtown, a therapy and living center. She wanted to return to Jump Start a second time to gain additional job skills and other training. Last summer she was placed in the food services area at Fred W. Paris Towers, a housing complex for senior citizens. Thompson's mother works at an assisted living facility as a Certified Nursing Assistant, and Thompson would like a career in a similar environment.

Thompson said her job at Highlands of Little Rock "was good." She liked the structure and always being busy. She assisted with residents, made welcome baskets for new residents, organized paperwork, and passed out the daily activities sheets and menus.

"She's a breath of fresh air," said Social Services Director Frankie Hansberry. "She learned her way around here quickly." Activities Director Teresa Rodgers, her immediate supervisor, agreed.

"Residents love her. They're glad to see a young person," Rodgers said. "She always has a smile on her face, and that's what the residents like to see."

Thompson 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.

Thompson will be a senior at Northside High School, where she participates in the Army Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (JROTC) and choir.

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.

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Caption: From the left: Activities Director Teresa Rodgers, Jump Start student Shateria Thompson of Fort Smith, and Social Services Director Frankie Hansberry show one of the welcome baskets Thompson made for new residents of the Highlands of Little Rock at Midtown. Thompson 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.