

## Media Release

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**For Immediate Release**

October 20, 2014

### **Fort Smith family attends summit for parents of students who are blind or visually impaired**



The Thompson family of Fort Smith was among other families with teens who are blind or visually impaired attending a conference to learn about services and opportunities for youth transitioning from high school to college or work.

The Parent Summit was sponsored by the DHS Division of Services for the Blind (DSB) and held at

the historic Hotel Seville in Harrison October 17-18.

Charles Thompson said that he, his wife Stephanie, and their children had attended another DSB-sponsored Parent Summit in Little Rock in 2013, but attended this conference to learn more about educational and career opportunities for their son Charles Thompson III and their daughter Sha' Teria, who are both visually impaired. Their youngest daughter Sierre' is sighted.

Thompson liked the presentation by Vocational Rehabilitation Teacher Jacob Grace and Area Field Supervisor Tina Shelby, both of the DSB office in Harrison, about the programs and services at the Alphapointe Center in Kansas City, Missouri. The center offers a college preparatory program, work experience, job readiness skills training, employment opportunities, and vision services to help people regain their independence, deal with the emotional aspects of vision loss and live more productive lives with the vision they have. Grace also demonstrated assistive technology and talked to parents and students about their needs.

Brenda Stiell of the Harrison Workforce Services office discussed job training, job search assistance, interviewing techniques, the importance of resumes, work experience, and services provided by Workforce Centers. When parents asked about transportation assistance, Stiell said gasoline assistance was available.

Parents and students expressed their concerns about the lack of transportation, especially in rural parts of the state.

Lou Talley of El Dorado, Area Field Supervisor and Transition Coordinator, discussed DSB transition services, including Jump Start, a career development program for high school students who are blind or visually impaired. DSB places students in part-time jobs in the mornings and has educational and recreational activities in the afternoons and evenings. The three-week summer program is designed to assist students in transitioning from high school to employment or post-secondary education.

Three speakers talked to parents and students about their transitions into college and careers. Bobby Atkison of Bergman, who has retinitis pigmentosa (RP) and is totally blind, talked about adapting to college and financial resources for books and tuition. After college, he became a semi-professional bass fisherman and now he and his wife Pam own a small farm.

Gustavo Manzanales of Little Rock, who now works at DSB as a Rehabilitation Specialist II and Rehabilitation Technologist, was blinded in an accident at age one and encouraged the parents to “have equal expectations of your blind and visually impaired children or students. Encourage a sense of competition.” He said children need to be encouraged to participate in sports, clubs, and other school activities, so they will develop skills needed in college and at work. He recalled his mother watching him from the window while he used his white cane to roller blade down the street.

Manzanales emphasized that parents need to include their children in all of the family’s activities. He also talked about the importance of Braille, especially in math. Manzanales and his wife Candice have three sighted children.

Liz Whitaker of Little Rock, State Rehabilitation Technologist, who is blind, told about her college life experiences. “Technology has opened up a whole new world for people who are blind and visually impaired. It puts us on a level playing field; we just have to convince employers.”

Terry Sheeler of Fayetteville, president of the National Federation of the Blind Arkansas affiliate, and Sandy Edwards of Little Rock, president of the American Council of the Blind Arkansas affiliate, talked about the importance of consumer support groups and what they had to offer.

Aundrea Sheeler of Fayetteville, who is visually impaired and attends college at the University of Arkansas, told parents and students how to research scholarship opportunities and coordinate various

funding sources. She explained DSB uses a system of comparable benefits, where it considers other funding sources prior to spending Vocational Rehabilitation funds to purchase services or pay for college expenses. She said some scholarships, such as those funded by the lottery, have several names.

DSB provided lodging, transportation and meals to eligible participants, and held the event on a Friday-Saturday to enable more families to attend.

DSB Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors were on hand to meet with the parents and students and answer any questions or discuss any concerns they might have. Information packets were given to families and students. Time was given for conversation and networking, so parents could meet each other and share their experiences.

“It (the summit) gave me more self-confidence. It helps me learn that blind people can do anything they put their mind to,” said Charles Thompson III, who graduated from Fort Smith High School in May.

His sister Sha’ Teria, who is in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade at Fort Smith High School, said the summit “was great” and provided information she needed about educational opportunities and scholarships.

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.

#### Cutline:

From the left, are Stephanie and Charles Thompson with their children, Sha’ Teria, Sierra’ and Charles III. The Fort Smith family attended a Parent Summit for families of students who are blind or visually impaired that was sponsored by the Department of Human Services Division of Services for the Blind in Harrison October 17-18.