



Media Release

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Teens gain skills to become independent adults

Remember when you were a teenager and could hardly wait to become an adult? Remember how you longed to make your own decisions about your life and take control of your destiny?

If you do, then you can appreciate the recent experiences of the 13 teenagers who graduated from Jump Start, a three-week career development program for high school students who are blind or visually impaired. Students learned skills to prepare them for life as independent adults. They were placed in part-time jobs and earned what for some was their first paycheck. Some of the students were away from home for the first time.

The program is designed to expose them to the world of work, assist them in transitioning from high school to employment or post-secondary education and increase their confidence in social situations. This is the only program of its kind in Arkansas.

The DHS Division of Services for the Blind (DSB) arranged part-time jobs for the students. To the degree possible, students were placed 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 according to their experience, skills and abilities. The high school students can return to Jump Start in successive years and be placed in more advanced jobs as their experience grows. Students from all across the state participated in this unique program.

Christian "Chris" Melvin of Little Rock and Anthony Coleman of Pine Bluff worked at the Arkansas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired's Instructional Resource Center, which distributes Braille and large print books to public schools. It was their first time to participate in Jump Start. "I'm glad I came, because it's helped me get responsible and prepare for getting a job," said Coleman. He liked the structure of working and

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his two supervisors. Melvin said he liked earning his first paycheck and learning how to get along with people in work and social situations.

“So often you hear bad things about teenagers, so I want their parents and other people to know how well they did,” said Cindy Wilkinson, director, of the ASBVI’s resource center. “They have been an enormous help. They worked hard with no grumbling.” Elaine Gerard, who also supervised the young men, agreed, saying “they showed initiative and had good attitudes.”

Quatisa “Tisa” Martin East of North Little Rock was placed at Margaret Bruton’s vending stand in the Pulaski County Health Department, because she is interested in managing a vending location through DSB’s Vending Facility Program (VFP). “Tisa worked hard. She did a good job. She’ll get faster with experience. She ran the (cash register) drawer here. I think she’ll make it in this world whatever she does. She’s good with customers and dresses neatly,” said Bruton. “I would have loved to have had such a program (as Jump Start) when I was that age.”

“Jump Start was awesome,” East said. “I want to do it again next year. You get to do a lot of activities. The work experience has been excellent. I learned real world skills.” She said she “loved” her supervisor, the program, the other students, and the activities. Her favorite experiences were a presentation on volunteering and then doing actual community service; touring the University of Arkansas at Little Rock; and the training by Leslie Jennings Moore of Moore Manners on business etiquette and how to dress for success.

Parker Rush of Maumelle wants to study sociology in college, so she was placed in a job at St. Francis House, which provides social services in response to emergency or economic situations created by loss of employment, low income, or illness. Rush applied for her first time to participate in Jump Start because, “I wanted to see what it’s like to work and have my own money.” Her favorite parts of Jump Start were learning how to plan and cook her own meals and a presentation by Metropolitan Bank that taught students about budgeting money, banking, preventing identity theft and credit card management.

Starkesha “Star” Sims of Little Rock worked at the Arkansas Regional Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped. She wants to be a teacher for students who are blind or visually impaired. This was the 11th grader’s first time in Jump Start. She said she made a lot of friends, enjoyed her job, and especially liked learning how to use the Central Arkansas Transit Authority bus system.

“The students are getting hands-on training, assistance, and experiences in every area from employment to daily living,” said Tanya Van Houten, Division of Services for the Blind Jump Start coordinator and rehabilitation teacher. “In the years I’ve been doing Jump Start, I’ve seen students come in with very little skills in everything from social adjustment to independent living to work experience and develop so they’re confident, enjoying their jobs and getting around independently.”

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 and clothing care. Students also toured the State Capitol and received hands-on training using accessible voting machines in the Supreme Court room.

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. In addition, 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. Some students who attend public schools and come from small communities have never interacted with other teenagers who are blind or visually impaired. Social skills and interactions with others are a crucial part of life, so recreational activities are built into the program. Students went to Wild River Country, saw a play at Murry's Dinner Playhouse, and attended a dinner/dance on the Arkansas Queen Riverboat. At the end of the program, they enjoyed a cookout at Murray Park and celebrated with a graduation cake provided by Community Bakery.

Other Jump Start students and their job placements included: Jacob Smith of Lexa, St. Edwards Hispanic Outreach Program; Elizabeth Sheeler of Fayetteville, Arkansas Arts Council; Hali Phillips of Lake Village, public radio stations KUAR/KLRE; Callie Hernandez of Amity, Evangelical Alliance for Immigration Service; Paige Clem of West Memphis, Eye Care Arkansas; Destine Miller of Marion, Onsite Therapies Clinic; Hope Lambeth of DeQueen, Children First pre-school; and another student who worked at a pharmacy.

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. Arkansas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired has partnered with the state 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.