

# Media Release

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**For Immediate Release**

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## **Fort Smith teens with visual impairments complete program**

Shateria Thompson and Trinh Ha of Fort Smith were among the 20 teens who completed Jump Start, a career development program for high school students who are blind or severely visually impaired. The program ran from June 7 – June 26.



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), was attended by students from across the state.

DSB placed students in part-time jobs in the mornings and offered educational and recreational activities in the afternoons and evenings. Jump Start participants stayed on the ASBVI campus during the week and returned home on the weekends.

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. Applications for the Jump Start program are taken in the early spring of each year.

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, who's visually impaired, and Ha, who's blind, decided to participate in Jump Start, because they wanted to gain work experience and other skills. Thompson worked in the food services area at Fred W. Paris Towers, a housing complex for senior citizens. She said she liked her job, but isn't a morning person and had to learn to wake up at 6 a.m. on her own. "I like working. I'd been asking my parents if I could apply for jobs ever since I started high school. I want to make my own money. I want to be independent."

"Shateria did great. I appreciated having her work here," said JinJer James-Green, Executive Director. Her immediate supervisor James Hudson agreed and said, "She caught on quick."



Ha did clerical work at Arkansas Lighthouse for the Blind. "I loved it. It was the first time I'd ever worked. Oh, I was so happy. I got my first paycheck ever. It was most awesome." She also received two days training on industrial sewing equipment adapted for people who are blind and was shown how work was done in the paper products department.

"She's done a wonderful job," said Sherree DeWitt, Human Resources Manager at the Lighthouse. "She's smart as a tack and is a very fast learner. She even found a better way to make our recruiting packets."

In addition to job skills, Jump Start students learned independent living skills that many people without visual impairments take for granted, such as banking and money management. Students were taught meal planning and participated in a cooking lesson with Chef Brian Kelly of Little Rock.

Learning how to live independently also means learning how to get around. Students received orientation and mobility training on how to travel using a white cane and learned how to use city buses.

Students volunteered on a gardening project at Our House, an organization that provides shelter, training, and child care for people who are homeless or near homeless.

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.

“I was bullied a lot from elementary school to junior high (due to her vision), but in high school two teachers intervened. I had more friends in high school because of them,” Thompson said. It gave her the courage to participate in the Army Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (JROTC) program and choir. “My Dad didn’t think I could do JROTC, but I had an A in that class.” After Jump Start, Thompson would like to work at an assisted living facility where her mother works as a Certified Nursing Assistant.

Social skills and interactions with others are a crucial part of life, so recreational activities were built into Jump Start. Students went bowling, attended an Arkansas Travelers baseball game, saw a movie, went skating, toured a submarine, and painted their own works of art.

Students practiced skills learned in a class on business and dining etiquette when they experienced fine dining at Savoy 1620 restaurant, enjoyed a meal at Benihana Hibachi Grill, and saw a play at Murry’s Dinner Playhouse. At the end of the three-week program, there was a graduation event on the Mark Twain Riverboat.

Ha said it was her first opportunity to experience many of the activities. Her favorites were skating, painting, bowling, and taking the submarine tour. “I was amazed the way people can live in such limited space and the conditions underwater (in the sub).” After Jump Start, Ha looks forward to returning to high school this fall.

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.

Photo caption:

Shateria Thompson of Fort Smith prepares to serve food to senior citizens. Beside her are JinJer James-Green, Executive Director, and her immediate supervisor James Hudson. Thompson was among students who completed Jump Start, a career development program.

Photo caption:

Trinh Ha of Fort Smith makes recruitment packets for Arkansas Lighthouse for the Blind as part of her clerical duties during Jump Start, a career development program.