Bald Knob teen who’s legally blind graduates from unique program

Jake Asikainen, 17, of Bald Knob was among teens graduating from Jump Start, a career development program for high school students who are blind or severely visually impaired, which ran from June 8 – June 27.

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), is attended by students from across the state. Twenty-one students were accepted into the program this year.

DSB placed students in part-time jobs in the mornings and had 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.

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.
Asikainen had no previous work experience, but is a self-described “computer geek and videogamer.” He and two other Jump Start participants with similar interests were placed at the used bookstore of the Cox Creative Center, part of the Central Arkansas Library System. Asikainen, Xaivier Davis of Sherwood, and Clayton White of Little Rock formed a friendship they expect to last long after Jump Start.

In fact, White had already started and registered a video gaming company. Asikainen and Davis plan to join him in developing a video game. White has already secured some of the licensing and composed part of the music. He plays several instruments. Davis plans to draw the artwork and Asikainen will contribute his computer skills.

At the Cox Center their knowledge of current literature, video games and other donated items was instrumental in researching, cataloguing, and pricing items for resale. They searched the Internet to find the average market value of the items. They re-organized the video games section. They found the library didn’t realize some of the donations of long play vinyl albums were actually laser discs. They separated the discs from the albums and created a new library section.

“We birthed the laser disc section,” said Asikainen. “We’ve left our mark on the library for the future, and people who were here when we worked here will remember us.”

Their supervisor Teresa Mikulan, manager of the Cox Creative Center, was impressed with the enthusiasm the young men brought to their tasks. She was also impressed with their self-motivation and their computer skills. “They were able to get my laptop to do things I didn’t know it could do.”

“I wanted to learn new skills, so I am not living at home for all of my life,” Asikainen said. “Jump Start was an amazing experience. It’s shown me what it’s like to wake up and go to work, what it’s like when you’re not living at home. It was a time full of memories and skills that I will use for the rest of my life.”

“Jake is a very eager young man ready to go to college and live on his own. He desires to have a life just like everyone else, with work, a home, and a family someday. He is very smart, has big dreams, and has a big heart,” said his mother Jessica Asikainen.

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, clothing care, banking, and money management.

Learning how to live independently also means learning how to get around. Students received orientation and mobility training that taught them how to travel using a white cane. They learned how to use city buses.
Working part-time and interacting with other students who are blind or visually impaired helped increase 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. Asikainen said he “enjoyed meeting other students who were visually impaired and all of the activities.”

Students saw a play at Murry’s Dinner Playhouse, experienced fine dining at Savoy 1620 restaurant after a class in business and dining etiquette; and enjoyed a cookout. Students volunteered at Arkansas Rice Depot, a statewide foodbank network and disaster relief organization; visited the farm and headquarters of Heifer International, a non-profit which provides livestock to impoverished families and teaches them sustainable agricultural practices; and toured the Mosaic Templars Cultural Center, which focuses on Arkansas's African-American history and culture. Students also toured the State Capitol and received hands-on training using accessible voting machines. At the end of the three-week program, they had a graduation event.

Participants stayed on the ASBVI campus during the week and returned home on the weekends.

Asikainen will be a senior at Bald Knob High School this fall. He has been in Engineering Club and Future Business Leaders of America (FBLA) since the ninth grade. He was selected to attend the National Engineering Club convention and has competed in the FBLA state computer problem-solving competition the past two years. He plans to go to college and work in the technology industry. He plays drums and guitar and enjoys reading, bowling, fishing, and playing video games.

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.

###