

Media Release

Contact:

**Kandy Cayce, DHS Division of Services for the Blind
(501) 682-0332**

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Hartman teen who's visually impaired graduates from unique program



Madison Russell of Hartman prepares lunch for children at Adventureland Academy, where she worked during the Jump Start career development program offered by the Department of Human Services Division of Services for the Blind.

Madison Russell, 17, of Hartman, near Clarksville, 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.

Russell had attended Jump Start last year and worked at a snack bar in the DSB vending facility program in the State Capitol. This year she was placed in the kitchen at Adventureland Academy, which has a child care center for ages six weeks to five years, a pre-school, and a summer camp for kindergarteners through fifth graders. This equaled a lot of hungry children to feed. "I had to learn to improvise and think quickly on my feet – both good skills to acquire," Russell said. Fortunately, she had an experienced co-worker to guide her.

Russell wanted to work at Adventureland, because she and her family know the owners. Ricki Corder, one of the owners, said Russell did a good job and having a staff person who was visually impaired "helped the children learn about diversity."

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.

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.

In the fall, Russell will be a senior at Westside High School in Coal Hill. She participates in choir, Science Club, Beta Club, and Family, Career and Community Leaders of America. After high school she plans to attend Arkansas Tech University at Russellville and study science and creative writing.

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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