

Media Release

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Fordyce teen who's visually impaired completes unique program



Shurshawna Lewis of Fordyce is among 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. 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.

Lewis did clerical work for the Law Offices of Peter Miller. “I really do like it. I do paperwork, scanning and filing.” It was her first job and the first time she experienced paydays.

Her supervisor Shirley Fields, legal administrator, said, “She has done well. She’s a quick learner.”

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

“I really liked making new friends,” Lewis said. “I liked being around people who are more like me (visually impaired). Jump Start was a lot of fun.” Jump Start participants stayed on the ASBVI campus during the week and returned home on the weekends.

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.

Lewis, who will be a senior at Fordyce High School, said she is looking forward to being on the flag team’s color guard when her school starts in the 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 -- From the left are Shirley Fields, legal administrator for the Law Offices of Peter Miller, and Shurshawna Lewis of Fordyce, who did clerical work for the firm as part of Jump Start, a career development program for high school students who are blind or severely visually impaired.