



Media Release

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Hartman teen who's visually impaired graduates from unique program

Madison Russell of Hartman, near Clarksville, has succeeded in finishing Jump Start, a three-week career development program for high school students who are blind or severely visually impaired. She was among 21 students from across the state who were accepted into the program, which ran from June 9 – June 28 this summer.

Students learned skills to prepare them for life after high school. The DHS Division of Services for the Blind (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.

Arkansas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired has partnered with DSB to put on the program, sharing resources and opening up dorms. Participants stay on the ASBVI campus in Little Rock during the week and return home on the weekends.

To the degree possible, DSB placed students 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. Students can return to Jump Start in successive years and be placed in more advanced jobs as their experience grows. This was Russell's first time at Jump Start and her first job. She worked at a snack bar in the DSB vending facility program in the State Capitol.

"It was cool. I liked it. Working was my favorite thing about Jump Start. At my job I learned to be sociable. Normally I'm quiet. You know Penn and Teller? Well, I was more like Teller, but now I'm more like Penn."

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“It’s been good. She’s learned a lot about the vending machines and how to count the money back to customers,” said her supervisor Beverly Kindle. “She helps fill the machines, stock the shelves and the refrigerator, and we’ve worked with the money and the cash drawer. I’ve taught her how to roll coins by hand; we don’t have a machine. I taught her to put her finger in the wrapper and balance the coins to get them started. She’s caught on good.”

Apart from working, Russell said touring the Mosaic Templars Cultural Center, which focuses on Arkansas's African-American history and culture, was her favorite Jump Start activity, because it “was so rich in history.”

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, and money management. Students were taught computer skills and business and dining etiquette. Students also toured the State Capitol and received hands-on training using accessible voting machines.

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. “I was surprised to learn people have different techniques for using their white canes and that there are different kinds of canes. All I knew were folding and straight canes. I learned there are different kinds of tips for canes,” Russell said. Students also 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. Social skills and interactions with others are a crucial part of life, so recreational activities are built into the program.

Students also saw a play at Murry’s Dinner Playhouse, visited the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, enjoyed a cookout at a park, and toured Heifer International Headquarters, a non-profit which provides livestock to impoverished families and teaches them sustainable agricultural practices. At the end of the program, they had a graduation event.

In the fall, Russell will be a junior at Westside High School in Coal Hill. She hopes to return to Jump Start next year.

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.