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Sitou Agbakpem prepares Kits4Kids, a school fundraising initiative held throughout the state of Missouri to help the relief efforts in Haiti. Agbakpem is a student at Pattonville High School.



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### SSD COULDN'T WISH FOR A BETTER BOARD

As part of School Board Recognition Month, SSD Board members (from left) John Koeper, Ken Eigenberg, Marilyn Stewart, Jan Goodman, James Westbury and Dan Cuneo were honored at a board meeting on Jan. 26. (Zella Williams was not able to attend). In recognition of the board's tireless work in support of the district, the members were treated to a multi-media presentation, in which students invited the Board to choose a "wish." Wishes included: a gardening lesson from students at Southview School; cosmetology services from students in the cosmetology program at South Technical High School; a spring car tune up from the automotive technology class at North Technical High School; and a basket of baked goods from students at Northview School. Board members also received care packages and cards from students and staff from around the district.



# SPECIAL EDITION



Issue 2, 2010

## Good things come in small packages Alexis Jasper named youngest winner ever to receive SSD's highest honor

At 6 years old, Alexis Jasper may be small in stature, but she has a heart and caring spirit as big as they come.

"I like to help people," said Alexis, a first-grader at Northview Elementary School in the Jennings School District. "It makes me feel great."

And it's that caring attitude that sets Alexis apart. Because of her extraordinary way of helping others, Alexis was honored as a 2010 SSD Special Ambassador.

The Special Ambassador Award — the highest honor presented by SSD — is given annually to a select group of organizations and community members who demonstrate an exceptional commitment to the students, staff and mission of SSD.

Special Ambassador awards may go to individuals or to groups. They may be awarded to educators from other school districts or employees of local agencies that support SSD students. They may be given to people who volunteer at our schools and in our classrooms. But whatever their background, whatever their title, the thread that connects them all is their lasting commitment to the success of SSD and the students it serves.

Alexis is the youngest individual to ever be honored with a Special Ambassador Award. SSD teacher Mary Smith and general education teachers Kristen Olson and Jennifer Conkright nominated her for the award.

Smith and Olson began co-teaching at Northview Elementary last year. Their kindergarten class included both general education students and students receiving special education services.

"We were concerned about making sure the classroom would be an accepting learning environment for all," Smith said. "But Alexis wasn't worried."

Smith and Olson said Alexis was ready to learn, ready to ask questions, and ready to do whatever it took to make it a great school year. She quickly became a role model, helper, volunteer and cheerleader.

Smith and Olson said Alexis was the first to encourage all students to do their best. She cheered them on when they succeeded and offered a hug when the job was difficult. She offered a hand to a student with multiple disabilities who needed help walking and getting out of her chair.

Smith said Alexis wanted all students to write, even if it meant placing her hand over theirs and helping them form the letters.

"She would see what the occupational therapists and paraeducators were doing, and she would do the same thing," Smith said. "She just did it naturally."

Alexis said it was easy for her to help other students.

"Because they might not understand what the teacher was saying, I would listen real good and then I would help them," she said. "I helped by saying the words slowly and helping with reading and with speech."

Olson said Alexis was a joy in the classroom.

"She enjoyed working with the students in her class," Olson said. "Alexis is a good friend to all students regardless of their abilities."

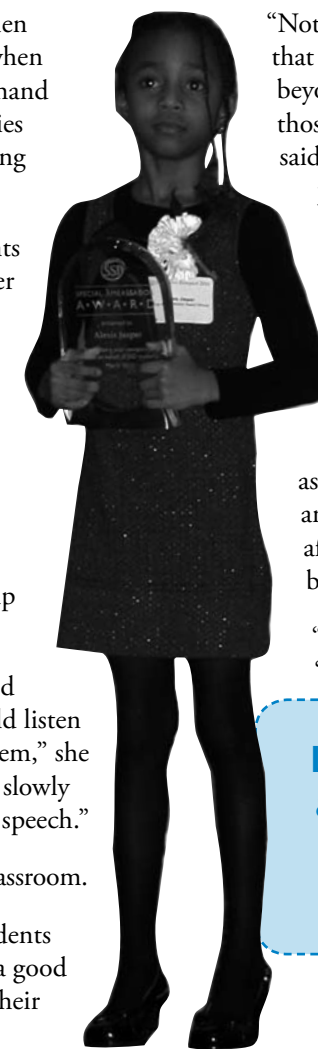
Smith said Alexis made a real difference in the lives of other students. She said there was one student in particular who had several challenging disabilities. This student would not take any food by mouth and used a feeding tube.

"Alexis became a friend to this girl, and soon she was trying to eat new foods in the cafeteria," Smith said. "This is something we had been trying to get her to do for years, but Alexis made it happen."

"Not often do we find students that want to go above and beyond their duties to help those with disabilities," Smith said. "We have been given that privilege with Alexis. She has taught us, and others, that it is easy to find the strengths and treasures in all."

Now in first grade, Alexis continues to go out of her way to help others without being asked. And she has advice to anyone else who might be afraid or worried about how best to help others.

"Don't be nervous," she said. "You've just got to try."



Look inside for a list of all the 2010 Special Ambassadors

# 2010 SSD Special Ambassadors

## Ameren Skilled Craft Education Team

The Ameren Skilled Craft Education Team is a group of Ameren employees who have been working with North and South Technical high school students for the past two years. They have shared hours, dollars and above all else, a real passion for helping SSD students excel.

Working with the tech division instructors, the team mentored, tutored, interviewed and has hired tech students for power plant positions with Ameren. For all of the young people who have been involved in the program, valuable advice and training provided by the team have made a positive difference in preparing them for the world after high school.

## Erica Barnes, Hazelwood West High School physical education teacher

When Hazelwood West High School physical education teacher Erica Barnes was approached nearly seven years ago to see if there was space for students with some pretty severe challenges to have a PE class, she said there was no need for a special class, the students could simply join her general education class.

Barnes not only welcomed the students, but she fostered relationships between them and their non-disabled peers. Everyone was having fun in PE and soon other students were asking how they could be a part of the class.

Barnes works to make sure that all students in her class are challenged and equally included in all activities. Successes in her class are measured by "personal bests," and not by strongest, fastest or highest.

"It's so enlightening to be able to work with the kids with special needs every day," Barnes said. "It's the high fives. It's the smiling faces. That's what makes it all worthwhile."

Because of Barnes' openness and willingness to work with children of all abilities, there is a greater understanding of students with special needs among all staff and students at Hazelwood West High School.

**"It's so enlightening to be able to work with the kids with special needs every day. It's the high fives. It's the smiling faces. That's what makes it all worthwhile."**  
—Erica Barnes



## Dave Daniels, Hazelwood West High School modern media teacher

Dave Daniels, the modern media teacher at Hazelwood West High School, involves and engages every student in his class by providing a safe, comfortable, open and challenging learning environment. He matches students of all abilities in groups in order to promote acceptance of each other's differences.

As coordinator of Hazelwood West's Channel 77 — the in-house news program — students of all abilities work side-by-side to film, conduct on-air interviews, and edit broadcasts.

"I'm such a firm believer in the inclusive classroom," Daniels said. "I've seen the benefits it has for special education students and for general education students alike. I've been a witness to so many success stories."

In fact, Daniels' successful inclusion efforts have made such a difference that IEP-modified classes in modern media were eliminated a few years ago at the high school. Daniels has created a class environment where there are no barriers, and all students are accepted and celebrated.

**"I'm such a firm believer in the inclusive classroom. I've seen the benefits it has for special education students and for general education students alike. I've been a witness to so many success stories."**  
—Dave Daniels

## Guckenheimer

Guckenheimer, the food service provider for Monsanto, joined forces with SSD in December 2001. As a Career Training Program site, Guckenheimer has provided quality food service instruction to SSD students, but their commitment to students doesn't stop there.

"It truly is a great pleasure to work with all the students," said Susan Berger, catering/private dining manager for Guckenheimer. "We take great pride when they graduate to see how far they've come. They leave with such great confidence. We know that we have given them a great path for their futures."

Guckenheimer consistently pairs SSD students with the best employees on its team to do meaningful jobs, not simply wiping tables or washing dishes. The staff and managers assist in assessing all students throughout their work experience and find ways to challenge them.

Managers have agreed to be references and write letters of recommendation for students and have helped them prepare for job interviews. Simply put, they have made SSD students a part of their team, all the while taking a sincere interest in the well being of each and every student.

**"It truly is a great pleasure to work with all the students. We take great pride when they graduate to see how far they've come. They leave with such great confidence. We know that we have given them a great path for their futures."** —Susan Berger, catering/private dining manager for Guckenheimer

## Bethesda Health Group

The partnership between Bethesda Health Group and SSD has enabled many students with significant disabilities to become successful workers.

Bethesda's staff and residents have been open and welcoming to SSD students and have provided a wide range of learning opportunities. SSD students participate in various career-training opportunities at Bethesda locations throughout St. Louis County.

The program has grown through the years. What started as a partnership between SSD and the Bethesda Orchard location in Webster Groves six years ago has now grown to include all retirement facilities within the Bethesda Health Group.

"These programs are a win for everybody — for the students, our residents and Bethesda, as well as the community as a whole," said R. Kenneth Bass Jr., senior vice president of Bethesda Health Group.



**"These programs are a win for everybody — for the students, our residents and Bethesda, as well as the community as a whole."** —R. Kenneth Bass Jr., senior vice president of Bethesda Health Group

## Wendy Pikula, Director of Education at Child Center – Marygrove

As director of education at Child Center – Marygrove, Wendy Pikula serves as advocate, educational decision maker, parent and often social worker for many students.

Pikula attends every IEP meeting, is available to problem-solve through difficult situations, provides information, serves on district committees as a parent representative and truly is a parent to the students she serves. She is always positive, sees the good in everyone and goes the extra mile for students.

But most importantly, she is there for the students who need her. She inspires in her students an inner confidence that allows them to explore and further develop their problem-solving skills.

## Marie Lyn Dayna Alexander, Sodexo's head cook at Southview School

As a Sodexo employee, Marie Lyn Dayna Alexander serves as the head cook at Southview School where she demonstrates an extraordinary commitment and dedication to students.

She has greatly improved the school environment for students and teaching staff by her participation in Southview life outside her scheduled work hours, by her professional excellence when providing food services, and by encouraging the students' communication.

"The kids are like my own children," Alexander said. "I love them... they're my first priority."

Alexander and her staff wait patiently for students to use the picture symbols and photographs that are displayed for each meal to make menu choices. Simple signs and natural gestures are respected as communication. She allows a student to initiate conversations and patiently waits for an answer or models an appropriate response when needed.

As a result, students request that Alexander's name be added to their augmentative communication systems, a true testimony as to the impact she's making on Southview students.

## Monsanto

Monsanto joined in a partnership with SSD's Career Training Program in 1998, and was the first for-profit organization to do so. From the beginning, Monsanto worked closely with its vendors and subcontractors — including food service, housekeeping, mail services and grounds — to establish programs for SSD students.

Over the past 12 years, Monsanto has provided classroom space, high-speed Internet connections for classroom computers, and training for SSD students. The company has included students in various Monsanto functions, such as the Diversity Group, featured SSD students in the company's intranet publication, and occasionally has hired students upon graduation.

Monsanto currently is in the process of expanding the Career Training Program to other areas, such as daycare, warehouse and clerical.



## Step It Up Inc.

Step It Up Inc. was founded by a group of local attorneys to give back to the St. Louis community by providing new, high-quality sports shoes to early childhood students in need.

For students in SSD's Early Childhood Special Education Program, Step It Up has provided approximately 500 pairs of new shoes since the beginning of the 2008–2009 school year.

"As an organization we would not be where we are today without the help of the community around us," said Madelyn Harman, with Step It Up. "Through the various donations of shoes, time and money, we've been able to help so many children."

Not only does this organization provide shoes, but it also cares deeply about making sure the shoes fit. Shoes can be prohibitively expensive for many young families and because of the dedication of this group of attorneys, SSD students have a pair of shoes that are properly sized — even if that means two differently sized shoes due to wearing adaptive foot orthotics.

Special Edition is a publication of the Communications Department of Special School District of St. Louis County.

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