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.

At Northview Elementary School last year, Alexis served in several roles to help her classmates. She would do the same thing,” Smith said. “She just did it naturally.”

“I was 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.

“Because they might not understand other students,” Smith said. “She just did it naturally.”

Alexis was ready to help other students.

“Because they might not understand 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.”

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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.” –Erica Barnes

Erica Barnes, Hazelwood West High School physical education teacher

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 made a positive difference in preparing them for the world after high school.

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’s so enlightening to be able to work with the kids with special needs every day.” –Erica Barnes

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.

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 dedicated various functions, such as the Diversity Group, featured SSD students in the company’s intrainet 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, warehousing and clerical.

Ameren

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 offered career training and 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 Bethesda is now a 501c3 organization. Bethesda, as well as the community as a whole.” –R. Kenneth Bass Jr., senior vice president of Bethesda Health Group.

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.

Monsanto

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 energy, 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.

Monsanto

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

Monsanto

Step It Up Inc.