

The Herald

JAG: Jobs For Grads

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Story by **Leann Burke**

When Southridge High School sophomore Jacob Hurt grows up, he either wants to be a teacher or a motivational speaker. Once a week, he gets to practice both his teaching skills and his inspirational skills thanks to his community service assignment with Jobs for America's Graduates (JAG), a national program that helps at-risk high school students make it to graduation day.

When Hurt walks into Mary Reese's seventh grade math classroom, he's more than just a high school sophomore. He's a role model. He helps the students with problems, checks over their notes and runs errands for Reese, making copies and picking up her mail.

He's well aware of the challenge, and makes sure to smile and say, "Hello." Sometimes, he'll chat with them longer, just to see how they're doing. There's one boy in particular on whom Hurt wants to make an impression. He said the boy reminds him of himself in seventh grade: a troublemaker who doesn't care about school.

"I always try to talk to him," Hurt said.

Hurt doesn't want to waste his high school years like he did his middle school ones, and the JAG program is helping him achieve his goal. Although Southridge's JAG program is only in its second year, the program has been around nationally for more than 30 years. In that time, the program has helped almost 1 million students graduate, attend college and land entry-level jobs with advancement opportunities, according to the program website. JAG helps students who may not be on track to graduate or who need extra help by bringing in a JAG specialist, a teacher who is dedicated only to the students in the program.

At Southridge, the JAG Specialist is Coriann Arts. It's her job to make sure the students keep their grades up, place them in job shadowing and internship opportunities, and help them apply to colleges or jobs for after graduation.

"I want to be a car salesman," senior Chase Stetter said. "Miss Arts is helping me find information about it." Arts is currently looking for local companies to partner with the JAG program. Partners would work with Arts to offer

internships, part-time jobs and guest speakers for students in the program.

She continues to check in with her students throughout the year following graduation, making sure they're still on track to become successful adults. Arts' role melds teacher and counselor into one position. She teaches the JAG class, which is similar to the careers class Indiana education standards require all students to take, but she also works one-on-one with her students, helping them fill out college and job applications.

Senior and JAG Class President Alyssa Middleton said having Arts gives the JAG students much more attention than they'd get if they relied solely on the school's guidance counselors.

"No one really sits down for a long time with students (in the guidance office)," Middleton said. "There's so many people that you're in and out."

Without JAG, Middleton said she would have lost her place in the 21st Century Scholars program, a state-wide program that helps students

pay for college. To be in the 21st Century Scholars program, students must have a 2.5 GPA. Middleton's GPA almost fell too low, but JAG helped her get back on track.

"JAG helped me know that I can succeed if I put my mind to it," she said.

Arts also schedules field trips to local businesses and colleges. JAG requires 14 to 20 guest speakers a year and four to six field trips in an effort to pique students' interest in a college or the workforce. Arts takes her students to local factories, such as Best Home Furnishings and the Toyota Motor Manufacturing plant in Princeton, as well as to nearby colleges like Vincennes University and the University of Southern Indiana. Guest speakers from local industries come in often, sometimes as frequently as twice a week. G&T Industries General Manager John Yoder is one of those speakers. He's visited Southridge's JAG class each of its two years and plans to continue speaking.

"These students may have a few more challenges than some of the others," Yoder said. "If there's anything I can do to help them with my experience, I'd like to."

The JAG program's curriculum is designed to teach the students work ethic skills, and JAG graduates

can add the Work Ethic Certification to their resumes. When Yoder visited the classes, he told students to take getting that certification seriously.

"If I have five (applicants) who are tied, but one of them has (the certification), I'm picking that one," he said.

In addition to the college and career guidance, Arts spends one day a week allowing her students to use the class time as a study hall and another day sending them to their community service assignments. JAG requires 12 hours of service per year, and it's Arts' job to make sure the students do it. She splits the class among several projects: helping out with the school's recycling program, helping in the special needs classrooms and assisting Southridge Middle School and Huntingburg Elementary School teachers.

She describes the program as both a class and an extracurricular activity. During the second semester, the students organize fundraisers to fund their trip to the Career Development Conference competition. At the competition, the students compete with JAG students from across the state in work skills competitions, such as brochure creating, public speaking and financial literacy. Last year, Southridge's team won most of their competitions,

including Middleton's first-place finish in the brochure competition.

Southridge's students impressed JAG Coordinator Sherry Montgomery in their performance at last year's competition.

"They just racked it all up," she said. "And it was their first year."

Montgomery oversees eight JAG programs in Southwest Indiana: Southridge, Pike Central, Tell City, Princeton, Gibson Southern, Vincennes Lincoln, Mt. Vernon and Evansville Bosse. If a JAG specialist needs a day off or some support, Montgomery steps in. Like Arts, she takes an interest in the students and their success and offers them an ear to listen.

"These kids, they're just looking for someone to talk to," Montgomery said. "Their parents aren't there, or they're working, sometimes more than one job. They're just not around. That's where we come in, to be that parental figure."