

JILG: A Program That Works

By AIMEE LaPLANT, LAURA POWERS and BRITTANY LIMPER

THE STATE JOURNAL-REGISTER

Posted Mar 17, 2009 @ 12:45 AM

Last update Mar 17, 2009 @ 09:24 AM

In 1996, the Jobs for Illinois Graduates program was founded to help each of its students achieve their potential.

The JILG mission was simple: Provide students with the motivation to stay in school, graduate and begin successful careers or higher education. JILG tries to help students who have some barrier to pursuing educational goals, such as difficulty with a core subject in school, economic challenges, health issues or simply a situation at home that distracts a student from learning.

JILG has served more than 20,000 Illinois high school students — including many in central Illinois. With more than 90 percent of participants graduating and 95 percent working or attending college full time, JILG has seen widespread success.

Though JILG differs from school to school, each program seeks to expose students to real-life job opportunities, volunteering and college preparation. Several local high schools offer JILG as either a class or an extracurricular activity.

Voice correspondents visited with students from local high schools who have been involved in JILG.

For more information on the JILG program, visit www.jilginc.org.

Aadam Cox

PORTA

Jobs for Illinois Graduates keeps Aadam Cox, a senior at PORTA High School, busy.

Like many students, the 18-year-old had no idea what he wanted to do for a living when he entered high school.

But Cox saw his older brother Aaron participate in JILG and realized that the program opened up several opportunities. Eventually, Aaron joined the U.S. Marines, and he's now stationed in Iraq.

"If you don't know what to do, go with JILG," Cox said. "It narrowed my decisions down with what I wanted to do."

Offered as an elective at PORTA, JILG works like a usual class. The instructor, Lisa Willhite, has the students take notes on topics involving career planning, such as getting and maintaining a job, Cox said. The elective also helped Cox realize he can't rely on his parents to support him financially.

The students also frequently do teambuilding exercises or take time off class to work on their community-service hours. The two retirement homes in Petersburg offer students a chance for a behind-the-scenes encounter as they serve their community.

"We get to leave our JILG classes and help the elderly with cleaning," Cox said. "I definitely got more involved in community service. I became more mature, I think."

JILG also sponsors Relay for Life, an annual fundraiser for the American Cancer Society. Currently, Springfield High School hosts the program. As secretary of PORTA High School's JILG, Cox and three other JILG leaders are in charge of helping with the event.

JILG offers many strategies to apply for jobs. Cox said the program helped him make a good impression during a job interview. He went to the interviews dressed in slacks and wore a tie. He got the job.

"Since then, I've kept Hardee's as a job for a little over a year," he said.

As for life after high school, Cox plans to attend Ohio Technical College in Cleveland. He wants to train in the PowerSport Institute program, which teaches students to work on motorcycles and other machines used in motor sports competitions.

If Cox realizes he doesn't want to be in mechanics, he has a backup plan: majoring in law enforcement at Western Illinois University.

As a son of the chief of police in Petersburg, Cox says his father inspired him, and he wants to carry on that legacy after his father retires.

Cox says he believes he is nearly guaranteed a job in the future because of his experience.

"Joining JILG is probably one of the better decisions I made in high school," he said.

Koady Hawkins

Lanphier

Koady Hawkins found a place to belong in his high school JILG class.

“The class itself made me a better person,” said Koady, who graduated from Lanphier High School in May 2008. He said doing service projects with his classmates made them all become closer.

“It made you feel better about yourself,” he said.

Dave Roberts, a teacher at Lanphier, said he makes sure each student in JILG gets a lot of one-on-one attention. He takes students on many field trips and gets them involved in the community.

For volunteer projects, students do a variety of things, from picking up trash to mentoring middle-school students. JILG participants hung out with the younger kids for a day and answered any questions they had about high school.

About 40 students are in the program at Lanphier. Each student keeps in touch with the teacher during the year following graduation.

Roberts said JILG class can give students a place to belong when they don't fit in anywhere else in school while they work on job and interviewing skills, teamwork and building relationships. Students also take interest tests to discover their strengths and learn to use them.

One of Koady's teachers suggested the class to him, saying it was a cool class that not a lot of students have a chance to take. Koady decided to try it out.

One activity Koady was involved with was resume competitions, which included traveling around the area. One of Koady's favorite memories from JILG was winning one of the resume contests.

The job skills Koady learned in JILG class have benefited him. In high school he started working as a janitor at Prairie Archway, a company that builds, sells and repairs trucks. Koady eventually learned mechanics and is now a diesel technician.

“It's going really good; I'm getting a lot of experience,” Koady said.

Roberts said Koady is a good example of a student who has found success through the JILG program, noting that Koady volunteered for different projects and got very involved with the class. Roberts describes Koady as “a really, really good kid.”

“I think he's the perfect example of finding family,” Roberts said.

Koady said JILG started out as a good class and ended up a great one.

“I would recommend taking JILG class to anyone,” Koady said. “It was probably one of the best classes I took in my high school career.”

Ariel Burns

Southeast

Ariel Burns, a senior at Southeast High School, has almost completed a life-changing program that is offered at his school.

JILG is offered to seniors at Southeast and other area schools. The program has given Burns the chance to develop confidence while preparing for college and his career.

“All the kids know what they want to do after high school, whether it be the military, college or the workforce,” he said.

Ariel found out about JILG last year at a site leadership meeting. His specialists at Southeast — the people who lead the JILG program — told Ariel about the class and encouraged him to check it out.

One teacher in particular, Sue Haptonstahl, was influential in his decision. She “knows how to talk to you without yelling, and she is relatable to my own age group,” Ariel said.

Ariel said he joined JILG because “it offered a nice opportunity to go to college.”

Another special person in Ariel’s life who supported him in his choice to go through JILG is his mother, Veda Burns.

“My mom encourages me in everything I do, and she is just as determined as I am,” Ariel said.

Ariel plans to attend Chicago State University on a full scholarship for cross country and track. He plans to become a counselor or psychologist.

He said JILG has helped him prepare for college and his career goals.

“JILG has helped me speak better in public and it helped me with a lot of my leadership skills,” Ariel said. He also said he learned about filling out college applications and creating resumes.

With college coming around soon, Ariel feels he is fully prepared because of JILG. When college representatives contact him, he is organized and knows how to answer their questions.

Ariel thinks JILG is different from other school programs. “JILG actually focuses on the individual person and has a specific purpose ... other programs are more just about college, military or one thing,” he said.

JILG also has inspired Ariel to help younger kids, encouraging them to do the right thing and steering them toward school or the workforce. Ariel has younger siblings and encourages them to join JILG when they're seniors in high school.

Ariel said his favorite memory of JILG is when he and other students went to Flora to participate in leadership activities.

Another aspect of JILG is elections. The JILG program at Southeast has six officers. His peers in JILG elected Ariel president.

During JILG meetings, students discuss various issues, Ariel said. "How a student should pursue certain colleges" is one topic.

Around this time of year, JILG students talk to juniors about the program and encourage them to join when they are seniors.

"JILG is fun work that really does prepare you for whatever you want to do," Ariel said.

Aimee LaPlant is a junior at Athens High School; Laura Powers is a home-schooled senior; and Brittany Limper is a sophomore at Sacred Heart-Griffin High School.

Copyright © 2009 [GateHouse Media, Inc.](#) Some Rights Reserved.

Original content available for non-commercial use under a [Creative Commons](#) license, [except where noted](#).