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Florida Disability Mentoring Day

By Tabitha Yang
DEMOCRAT STAFF
WRITER

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Two high-school students with disabilities were creating a short digital film on Wednesday with help from Challenger Learning Center program director Harry Hawbecker. Their faces serious and their eyes focused on the computer screen in front of them, they finally cracked smiles when they got to take a look at the short film they had created on planets and stars in outer space.

Jason Allen, 17, and Josh Baldwin, 14, were among more than 70 young people and job seekers with disabilities shadowing professionals as part of Florida Disability Mentoring Day. The young people were matched with business leaders, city officials and professors from places such as Volunteer Florida, the city of Tallahassee, the Florida A&M University School of Architecture and the Florida State University French Department.

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While Allen and Baldwin were learning about activities at the Challenger Learning Center, which teaches students and adults about rockets and outer space, dyslexic student Austin-Lee Ard, 14, was talking to students and professors at FSU's Modern Languages Department.

She had the opportunity to speak with Alec Hargreaves, the director of the Winthrop-King

French Institute at FSU, as well as a guest, former French government leader Azouz Begag.

"I thought it was informative and very fun," Ard said. "I'm thinking about being a foreign-language teacher ... and I've taken French classes, so I wanted to see what it would be like to teach a foreign language."

Hargreaves said he admired Ard's ability to speak easily and comfortably with adults, even those as well-known as Begag.

"She was very, very quickly at ease with a very distinguished guest," Hargreaves said. "I was impressed at her confidence."

To conclude the day, participants met for a celebratory reception from 4 to 5 p.m. at the Challenger Learning Center.

Contact reporter Tabitha Yang at (850) 599-2304 or tyang@tallahassee.com. For more information about the Disability Mentoring Day, visit www.floridadmd.org.

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Jason Allen, a sophomore at Chiles High School, watches a virtual projection of constellations at the Challenger Learning Center Planetarium on Wednesday. He was participating in the center's Disability Mentoring Day.

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