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## Youngsters explore jobs they may do

Center Academy has a special Career Week experience.

By KAY B. DAY, River City News correspondent

Today, the corridors at Center Academy in Mandarin are full of professionals. A zookeeper tends to a hamster. An aerospace engineer discusses missiles, rockets and the space program. A soldier describes the components of his uniform.

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There's one catch.

These experts are the professionals of the future. The presentations they're delivering are a product, school director Stephanie Thompson says, of Career Week.

"Students have researched a career and today they're dressed as professionals and they'll do a report," she said.

This week, the pupils have also heard from adult professionals in a variety of fields. Parents as well as people from the community have come to the school to share information about careers. A newspaper reporter, an attorney, a nutritionist, a fitness instructor and an agent from the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives are a few of the specialists who took time to explain educational requirements, salary ranges and special skills needed to do their respective jobs.

"It's important to give students the opportunity to explore careers," Thompson said.

This hands-on activity is one example of Center Academy's focus on each student's individual needs and strengths. The private school is one of four in the Jacksonville area committed to "optimizing the giftedness of every student." Most of the students at this location are from Mandarin, although some come from as far away as St. Augustine. There are other locations at Jacksonville Beach, in Orange Park, and on Jacksonville's Westside.

The presentations on the final day of Career Week are a culmination of skills like research, writing, and public speaking. The students not only make a speech, they also use visual aids.

Jessica Brown, a sixth-grader who hopes to become an environmentalist, has brought her hamster to school as part of her demonstration. Her fellow classmate Erica Katzin hopes to become a zookeeper. Her exhibit contains a snake and an alligator, both plastic in the interest of safety.

Jared Whaley, a seventh-grader dressed in a white collared shirt with necktie and dress slacks, aspires to be a businessman one day.

"I plan to own an indoor mall," he says.

He talks about the college education he'll need and the challenges he'll face.



-Jared Whaley discusses the nuts and bolts of being a businessman during his presentation for Career Week..  
KAY B. DAY/Special-



Kyle Mason (left rear) and Daniel Porter (right) came dressed in military uniforms, while Aaron Disney (front) wore business attire.  
KAY B. DAY/Special

"Being a businessman is hard," he says. "An owner has to train people and pay people."



Center Academy director Stephanie Thompson stands and watches as students present nuts and bolts reports about different professions as part of Career Week. Seated behind her are Marsha Veisz (left) and Connie Hoolahan (right) who are applauding a student's presentation. KAY B. DAY/Special--

He acknowledges the pressure:

"If you're not successful, you'll be on the street."

Jared uses a poster he's made and a pointer to indicate successful people in the field he's chosen. He concludes his presentation by showing sketches of sports shoes he has designed himself.

Devon Johnson-Robinson has a practical reason for his goal to become an aerospace engineer. Florida needs more of them. He talks about the engineering courses he'll take, and he covers the different types of specialties such as planes, missiles and rockets. He plans to "design, develop and test aircraft."

Daniel Porter stands at attention, dressed in full combat gear except, of course, he has no live ammunition. He explains all the parts of his uniform. Daniel wants to be a Green Beret, and he shares information about the importance of camouflage if a soldier is in enemy territory. During the question and answer session after his presentation, teaching assistant Marsha Veisz notes the purpose of camouflage is to make you "look like a bush."

Teacher Connie Hoolahan adds, "Even your gunshots need to sound like those of the other side."

Daniel plans to attend West Point or Davidson College.

Sixth-grade student Bryce Rogers follows with a presentation about being a surveyor like his dad. He'll definitely have financial security, because "every house has to be surveyed before you can build." And he's covered all the necessary equipment and less obvious items.

"You need lots of bug spray," he says.

Hoolahan and Veisz prepared the students for this day for weeks, taking the classes to the library on different occasions to investigate career choices. They've used a career exploration program called ASVAB, the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery, to learn about skills and educational requirements for different vocations. The test includes myriad career choices ranging from the arts to medicine.

Thompson says students at Center Academy are a diverse group.

"Many need help in different areas," she says.

Some have attention deficit disorder and others have dyslexia.

"We practice authentic teaching and authentic learning," she said, with Career Week being a perfect example. "Some of the students are kids who've fallen through the cracks at other schools."

Here, one of the first goals for recovery involves self-esteem. Thompson says for the last two years, 100 percent of the seniors have graduated. And, she said, tuition is comparable to that of other private schools, and some scholarships are available.

She says Career Week is a great way for students to gain insight into skills needed for careers they're interested in. She recalls the words of one speaker, adding the message is something both adults and children can learn from:

"It's a blessing to find a career you enjoy."