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**C OF O STUDENT SAYS BOYS & GIRLS CLUB SET HER ON THE
PATH
TO SUCCESS DESPITE SEEMINGLY INSURMOUNTABLE
OBSTACLES**

BRANSON, MISSOURI - Sarah Day-Ahlgren may appear to be like any other 18-year-old student on the campus of College of the Ozarks in Pt. Lookout, Missouri, but her outgoing personality and confident smile conceal a past few others there could imagine. Sarah's journey to the selective school, known as Hard Work U for its campus jobs program that allows students to work to earn their tuition, seemed an unlikely one at best.

As a youngster, Sarah's frequent moves between disconnected family members in Chicago and Atlanta, along with years of home schooling by her single mother Diane – often conducted in noisy offices where her mother worked – left Sarah feeling shy and isolated from her extended family and peers. When Sarah was 10 years-old she and her mother moved to the Branson area. Sensing that Sarah could benefit from being around other children, Diane arranged for Sarah to attend the Shirley M. Schaefer Boys & Girls Club.

Sarah says that although she may have appeared withdrawn at first, she was more irritated than intimidated by the other kids at the Club. "After being around adults in offices all those years, I just thought kids were silly and immature," she said. "The staff helped me come to enjoy being around other kids and convinced me to try things I never would have considered."

Before long, Sarah said she looked forward to going to the Club every day and quickly became active in leadership programs such as Torch Club and Youth Council. "There was always something fun and interesting that I wanted to take part in," she said.

By the time Sarah was 16, she was offered a part-time job at the Club helping other kids build confidence through learning and developing social skills. "I really enjoyed watching the introverted kids come out of their shells," she said. As a staff member, Sarah worked in the Art Studio and taught guitar lessons. She said she tried to greet most of the 200 kids attending the Branson Club by name every day. "I wanted

them to know they belonged to a group that really cares.”

In November of 2006, just before Sarah turned 17, her mother entered the hospital for a pre-existing heart condition, but died a few weeks later. Sarah was devastated. She was completely alone with not a single family member by her side, despite her repeated attempts to connect with them. The staff of the Boys & Girls Club quickly stepped in to help. They rallied donors to help pay for Diane’s funeral and checked on Sarah day and night. At the Club’s annual Jingle Bell Gala the following year, Sarah thanked the staff and donors saying, “You have no idea what this means to me.”

After her mother’s death, Sarah moved in with a family from her church, and despite feeling withdrawn and refusing to share her emotions, the Meyer family took her in as one of their own. Sarah instantly gained a brother, a sister and a loving extended family.

Sarah says the Boys & Girls Club inspired her to apply to College of the Ozarks. “Miss Charity (Stillings) has such strong character and strong faith,” she said. “I wanted to be just like her!” As soon as Sarah found out C of O had accepted her, she called the Boys & Girls Club. “I could hear (Unit Director) Billy Rader and the other staff cheering in the background.”

Sarah says she loves her new campus home. “My classes are great. I’ve got friends from all over the country! We hang out, play ping-pong and do the usually college stuff.”

Although Sarah says she will never stop grieving the loss of her mother, she believes God has a plan for her life. “I can be a role model for other kids and teens,” she said. “I have a story to share. I have a purpose.”

Sarah credits her mother with teaching her the value of work hard -- something she’s thankful for now that she’s studying for a degree in graphic design at Hard Work U. “The Boys & Girls Club taught me to pursue my dreams and they gave me the confidence to know I can succeed. For that, I feel incredibly blessed.”

About the Boys & Girls Club of the Ozarks

In 2008, the Boys & Girls Club of the Ozarks served more than 1,250 school-age youth through after-school, summer and outreach programs at its three locations. In addition to quality programs and activities, Boys & Girls Club members can receive a nutritious meal or snack, academic assistance and age-appropriate personal growth opportunities for only \$25 per school year. In 2009, the Clubs are celebrating 15 years of helping kids in the Ozarks “Be GREAT!”

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For more information about the Boys & Girls Club of the Ozarks or hear other stories like Sarah’s, please contact Autumn Page at 417.335.2089 x 225 or 417.496.9404.

Photo Caption 1: Sarah Day-Ahlgren (r) pictured with Madison Freund and MacKenzie Collins (l-r) on a Boys & Girls Club of the Ozarks field trip.

Photo Caption 2: Sarah Day-Ahlgren was selected by the Boys & Girls Club of the Ozarks as Youth of the Year in 2004.

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