LIKE MANY STUDENTS, Kam Phillips chose to attend the University of Missouri for its journalism program. “I wanted to be a broadcast journalism major, and I knew MU was the place to pursue that,” she remembers, noting that as she enrolled in classes such as Community and Organizations and Public Policy, her focus began to shift. “I always say that journalism is what got me here, but social work is what kept me here.”

Phillips created Dream Outside the Box, a program that exposes underprivileged youth to alternative career and extracurricular opportunities. Her hard work – in addition to an arduous application process and interview – earned her a Truman Scholarship. “I was on spring break in New York City, shopping in the French Connection boutique when I got a call from Vice Provost Jim Spain that I had been selected to be one of two Texas Truman scholars,” she remembers. “That day, my life changed. I’ve gained a network of some of the most extraordinary young people whom I’m proud to call friends. As a Truman Scholar, I have the opportunity to go to Princeton, Syracuse, University of Texas and other schools on a full scholarship.”

Phillips, who graduates in May 2012, plans to join other Truman Scholars in Washington, D.C. this summer for the Truman Summer Institute, which will provide housing and a stipend as she completes an internship, hopefully at a center for social policy change or the White House (she’s applied to positions in the Office of the First Lady and the Office of Public Engagement). Afterward, she hopes to obtain a post-summer fellowship in public policy and anti-poverty work, in addition to expanding Dream Outside the Box.

In the meantime, Phillips is making a difference locally. In October 2011, she was elected Homecoming Queen at MU, and although the title comes without specific responsibilities, Phillips has chosen to use the crown for advocacy purposes—she’s spoken to the City Council on behalf of mobile-home-park residents against rezoning, as well as working with the Veteran’s Center to maximize opportunities for Veterans at MU. But don’t worry, she took part in all the traditional homecoming festivities as well. “Having the opportunity to go on the field and ride in the parade and be a part of all of the Homecoming activities is quite glamorous,” she says. “Being homecoming queen is an honor.”

“I always say that journalism is what got me here, but social work is what kept me here.” Kam Phillips

“Life as a Leader
Kam Phillips: Truman Scholar, Homecoming royalty, Social Work standout

PHOTO BY JOSH MURRAY

EXCERPTS