

Helping Hands Brings Youth Leadership to Flooded Community

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Research on healthy youth almost always stresses the importance of healthy communities. Those are communities where parents, youth, and citizens work with community agencies, organizations, and government to create a vision for the healthy development of their young people. As educators, we know that in the healthiest communities, young people both contribute to the community and benefit from it (Carnegie Council, 1996).

But how can children thrive and contribute in a community under water?

That was the challenge that the College of Education and Human Development's Center for 4-H Youth Development faced during this year's devastating spring floods in the Red River Valley. With nearly 40,000 people evacuated from their flooded homes in Grand Forks, North Dakota, and East Grand Forks, Minnesota, all semblance of normal life for children and families washed away with the surging river. Schools and businesses closed; families scattered to shelters and relatives' homes far and wide. Throughout the Red River Valley, lives were turned upside down.

4-H staff with the University of Minnesota Extension Service in Minnesota's Polk, Mahnomon, and Clay counties recognized that they could help. Young people could help other young people get through the flood and its aftermath. One of the tenets of 4-H, as a grass-roots organization in every county of the state,



Spring floods of 1997 forced nearly 40,000 people from their homes in Grand Forks, North Dakota, and East Grand Forks, Minnesota.

is that youth should have the opportunity to help resolve issues that are critical to their lives, to their families, and to their communities. In addition, 4-Hers reinforce their own learning by teaching others.

With that philosophy and way of operating in place, it wasn't surprising that Polk County extension educator Bob Quinlan understood the crisis in his county and began to formulate plans for the 4-H Helping Hands summer youth activity project in East Grand Forks. He saw the community's critical need for child-care services while parents devoted their time, energy, and money to flood cleanup and rebuilding.

"I thought, Wouldn't it be *something* if we could get our Minnesota 4-H kids up here?" Quinlan said. "Think of all the 4-H kids we've got throughout the state who are trained to work with other kids, who've been interacting with kids of all ages the whole time they've been in 4-H."

The idea of mobilizing a group of 4-H volunteers was exciting, but to make it happen Quinlan needed quick access to funds and support.

Nationwide, 4-H has long designated funds for at-risk youth and families, a designation that surely fit the displaced and stressed families along the Red River Valley. And within Minnesota itself, a 4-H project called Mapping the Road to Stronger Communities offered a possibility for quick response and immediate assistance to families in the flood-damaged area.

Mapping the Road to Stronger Communities is a community development project forged out of a partnership between the University of Minnesota Extension Service and the research arm of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, known as the Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service (CSREES). Just months before the Red River flooded, CSREES had given Extension in Minnesota a five-year grant to launch three

community-based projects in the state. One of the "Mapping the Road" projects was slated for Polk County, but the flood forced its own priorities. With quick response and approval by both CSREES and state 4-H officials, some of the

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CSREES funds earmarked for another Polk County effort were diverted to flood response, notably the Helping Hands summer youth activity project.

Working with the East Grand Forks Park and Recreation Department, Quinlan and Helping Hands coordinator Sandy Peterson quickly put together a day camp for children between the ages of 6 and 10. The day camp operated daily out of three school sites in the community, serving 150 children during the summer. University of Minnesota, Duluth, student intern Mark Erickson pulled programming



4-H teen volunteers came from all parts of Minnesota to work at the Helping Hands day camps in flooded East Grand Forks.



The Helping Hands camp experience showed 4-H volunteers that they can contribute to society in meaningful ways.

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—Journal entry from a Helping Hands volunteer

ideas off the Internet. Working alongside paid Park and Recreation Department staff, the 4-H youth and adult volunteers contributed their energy and creativity to the children of East Grand Forks for a week at a time. Their days were spent giving children some semblance of stability and routine at a time when their home lives were in disarray. Quinlan recalled, “If we could give the kids some solid programs, we knew they’d be able to work through a lot of the stress of losing so much.”

For a few hours every weekday for eight weeks, Helping Hands participants came to the sites to have some fun and to forget, at least temporarily, about their problems and their families’ losses. “These kids had gone through some traumatic experiences during the flood and their families were still reeling by summer,” Quinlan said. “By bringing in teenage 4-H members who are trained in ways to engage children creatively, we knew we could help them regain ownership of their lives and their emotions.”

Children attended Helping Hands free of charge and the Salvation Army provided meals and snacks. Quinlan said that some of the most ordinary activities—singing, playing games, and

producing craft items—were among the most popular. Handmade terrariums, mobiles, and even sand candles crafted out of recycled flood sandbags gave the children new bedroom decorations at a time when many of their old possessions had fallen prey to the floodwaters. “It was important for the kids to regain some self-esteem and some stability in their lives,” Quinlan said. “The 4-H volunteers were great at drawing kids out and helping them have fun without having to think about everything that was going on with their families, their homes, and the entire community.”

In addition to funding from CSREES, the Helping Hands program relied on donations of money and supplies from Extension staff and 4-H clubs throughout the state. Extension Master Gardeners donated seeds and plants for gardening and terrariums. The Department of Natural Resources’ Minnaqua project helped with outdoor activities and donated food. The 4-H club from Murray County sent money and a letter saying, “We had a tornado here a few years ago, so we know a little of what you’re going through.”

Helping Hands was an effort aimed at the children of East Grand Forks, but the children weren’t the only ones who benefited from it. True to the 4-H model of reinforcing young people’s own learning by teaching others, the teenage volunteers learned too. During their week as Helping Hands volunteer staff, the 4-Hers kept journals of their experiences on laptop computers supplied by the Crookston campus of the University of Minnesota.

One volunteer wrote, “I believe that the flood has worn all of East Grand Forks and Grand Forks residents down. So when these kids come to day camp and spend the day with us—people who haven’t dealt with the floods at all—it’s a totally different situation. . . . Parents may not have time to push their children on

swings or do crafts with them. One little girl said, 'Mommy doesn't take us to the park anymore' and I thought to myself, this is how I am making a difference. I am making a difference to this little girl simply by playing on the playground with her and holding her hand until we get indoors. [Parents] may be too busy trying to supply a roof over their families' heads or trying to sell their houses to relocate so they don't have to live in fear of the Red River ever again. This has been one of the most enriching experiences of my life and if asked to do it again, I would jump at it."

Quinlan and Peterson said that, despite the makeshift setting in flood-damaged schools and neighborhood centers, they saw a lot of learning going on at Helping Hands sites. The project was about East Grand Forks children learning to feel secure and capable again, but it was also about teenage 4-H volunteers learning they have the skills to contribute to society in meaningful ways. In East Grand Forks they made a big difference at a very difficult time.

Bibliography

Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development. (1996). *Great transitions, preparing adolescents for a new century*. Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development.



Pop bottle terrariums and other craft items gave the displaced children new bedroom decorations.