

4-H alumni give back to Minnesota communities



Margaret Anderson Kelliher first put her talents and skills into service for others as a 4-H'er coming of age during the Farm Crisis. The former 4-H youth state president later served as speaker of the Minnesota House of Representatives. She currently leads an effort to make Minnesota one of the country's top five technology states.

All youth have the ability to lead, and 4-H makes sure it happens. In fact, 4-H youth are three times more likely to contribute to their communities. That's because 4-H is designed to bring out a young person's unique ability to lead and succeed. And, 4-H alumni continue to contribute long after graduating from 4-H.



In the early 1980s, when the Farm Crisis descended on rural Minnesota, a teenage farm girl worried. She could have found any outlet to cope, for better or for worse. Fortunately, she had 4-H in her life, and learned to make constructive use of her experience to help others.

That girl was Margaret Anderson Kelliher, former speaker of the Minnesota House of Representatives, and current president of the

Minnesota High Tech Association. Through 4-H, she found the opportunity to speak to other young people about family stress and how to reach out for help. "That was really important for me: learning how to lead through adversity," she says.

Anderson Kelliher draws a direct line from her 4-H leadership experience to leading a diverse House of Representatives in the mid-2000s.

“Leadership is the ability to bring forth a vision,” says Dorothy Freeman, Extension associate dean for youth development. “4-H is unique in how we engage young people in a process to bring out their own abilities so they can give back. Ultimately, leadership is about contributing.”

Learning to lead

Anderson Kelliher says her 4-H experience in rural Blue Earth County illustrated the value of 4-H’s approach: “I got to progress on—from elementary and high school through my first year in college.”

According to Freeman, young 4-H’ers are engaged in age-appropriate development early on. “Whether it’s a 9-year-old assigned to the snack committee or a high school junior serving as a 4-H club officer, they start with making small decisions, setting goals with others and learning to lead,” she says.

For Anderson Kelliher, in the early 1980s those goals took on a serious tone. “It wasn’t just about happily leading meetings and getting great projects done. It was about putting my head, heart, hands and health into service, as 4-H’ers pledge to do.”

Like Anderson Kelliher, Kandiyohi County Commissioner Harlan Madsen, who was a 4-H’er in the 1960s, remembers the first 4-H meetings he chaired. For Madsen, it was in eighth grade at a meeting at Lake Lillian Elementary School.

“The adult leader told me afterwards that I did a good job, but I remember to this day that I was scared witless. What I learned in 4-H was that I could do that—whatever it was—with encouragement and training,” he says. “We didn’t have the terminology for it back then, but we were learning about leadership.” Today, Madsen is serving his 19th year as county commissioner, and he raises cattle and grows crops on the family farm.

Anderson Kelliher understood how much she drew on her 4-H experience early in her time at the Legislature. “After one of the first speeches I ever gave on the House floor, another member came up to me and asked, ‘Where did you learn to speak so well?’” she recalls. “I realized it was my 4-H training—I was a food and dairy demonstrator at the summer fairs. That taught me how to speak in front of others.”



Harlan Madsen, 4-H alumnus and Kandiyohi County commissioner of 19 years, finds it rewarding to support young 4-H’ers as they learn skills needed to serve their communities and bring about their own vision of success. Pictured at left: 1967 photo of Madsen showing his cow during his last year in 4-H. Pictured at right: Madsen with 4-H member Ashley Swanson.

Building our future

“When I look back, we were being taught accountability, responsibility, respect, process and skills like public speaking,” Madsen says. “Most people are not born with leadership skills. It’s something that’s developed through opportunities that allow our youth to begin serving early on. That’s how we’re building our future.”

“This generation of youth is looking to have a strong purpose in this world, and doing it collaboratively,” says Jennifer Skuza, Extension assistant dean for youth development. “We give them the opportunity through small group learning.”

Anderson Kelliher makes a connection between the 4-H model and the employees sought by members of her association. “In the technology world, so much of the work is both hands-on and strategic. This is what 4-H does. Communities should invest in organizations like 4-H because this is what you want the future workforce to look like.”

To volunteer or join 4-H, visit www.4-H.umn.edu

MINNESOTA 4-H PLEDGE

I pledge
my **HEAD** to
clearer thinking,
my **HEART** to
greater loyalty,
My **HANDS** to
larger service,
my **HEALTH** to
better living,

for my family,
my club,
my community,
my country
and my world.

