



Once in 4-H, always in 4-H! Stearns County Commissioner Don Otte, who participated in 4-H as a teenager, learns some new steps from current 4-Hers Mohamed and Jimmy at the La Cruz Community Center in St. Cloud.

Discovering by doing

4-H's unique learning experiences teach young people essential life skills



Every Thursday at 3:30 p.m., the La Cruz Community Center fills with laughing kids eager to work on computers, visit with friends and take part in the week's 4-H project. The weekly 4-H after-school program serves boys and girls from the community housing complex, primarily immigrants from Somalia, Togo, Sudan, Ethiopia and Guatemala. Casey Torgerson, an Americorps Promise fellow for 4-H after-school programs, is guiding Mohamed and his friends as they create their hip-hop dance group. He is especially excited about picking the music.

“I'm glad that my friends and I get to choose what we do in 4-H,” Mohamed said. “Our dance group will be really fun!”

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The project illustrates how 4-H's unique “learn by doing” model can influence adolescent behavior and development.

Young people in 4-H give back to their communities. Jimmy, a 4-H participant in St. Cloud, paints a brick that is part of a design his club created for a public park used by senior citizens.

Today's youth are tomorrow's leaders. But how do we get there from here? With nearly half of Minnesota's 10- to 12-year-olds spending their after-school hours unstructured and unsupervised, parents and community leaders statewide are asking that question.

Extension's 4-H Youth Development Program has some answers. When young people have a

chance to get involved with something they like and “learn by doing,” they make better decisions, give back to their communities and grow up to be solid, contributing citizens. Case in point: 13-year-old Mohamed and his friends, all residents of St. Cloud's La Cruz Community Housing complex. Occasional youth-development participants, the boys became “regulars” when they were asked to develop a program that excited them. Now they are deep into planning their own hip hop dance group.



How do we cultivate tomorrow's leaders?

"In 4-H, youth develop their 'head, heart, hands and health' by designing and participating in their own programs and activities," said Dorothy Freeman, 4-H State Program Leader. "They're required to reflect on the process, draw conclusions and relate the learning to future experiences in their lives."

4-H is Minnesota's largest youth-serving program, providing young people with access to youth development programs and activities in all of its 87 counties. Last year, 113,000 young people throughout the state participated in 4-H.

Adult volunteers play a critical role in 4-H's unique, learn-by-doing model. They guide the youth through a discovery process by prompting them to question, analyze and reflect.

Community service is another important part of 4-H. This summer, the La Cruz 4-H group will team up with the City of St. Cloud Adopt-a-Park program. The 4-H participants will work with residents of a new senior housing development to beautify Schmidt Park with flowers, paths, benches and birdhouses.

Stearns County Commissioner Don Otte has been a 4-H supporter since 1958, when he was a teenager and showed a hog at the county fair.

"Minnesota's young people are our future," said Otte, "and communities need to make an investment in their future."

To learn more about Extension's youth development programs, visit www.extension.umn.edu/4-H or www.extension.umn.edu/Youth

4-H projects are funded in part through the Minnesota 4-H Foundation. To make a tax-deductible contribution, visit www.fourh.umn.edu/foundation

Eurell and his twin sister, Arielle, have been active in 4-H since they were 12 and a friend told them about the 4-H group at St. Paul's Rivertown Commons. Since then the 17-year-olds have been Bay Lake Camp counselors, teen teachers for younger kids in after-school programs and participants in Urban Youth Lead.

"I've learned how to communicate clearly," said Eurell about his experience with Urban Youth Lead. "And I've learned a lot of patience. There will always be some kind of conflict in your life, and I've learned how to deal with conflict in the right way."

Arielle agrees. "I've also learned to be proactive in whatever I do. Learning leadership skills at an early age taught me to ask questions and create my own plan."

Minnesota 4-H in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area began Urban Youth Lead in 2006. The leadership development program teams up with schools (Minneapolis and St. Paul Public Schools are two of the program's biggest partners), agencies, organizations and volunteers to build sustainable leadership programs that meet the unique needs of urban youth. Participants design their own individual and group projects, which may include job shadowing, volunteering, community service work or mentoring.

Young people incorporate specific learning experiences into their programs and create leadership portfolios to illustrate their experiences and growth as leaders. The program has served nearly 600 boys and girls in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area since it began.

To learn more about Extension's Urban Youth Lead, visit www.fourh.umn.edu/Urban



Eurell, age 17, helps students at Dayton's Bluff Achievement Plus Elementary School in St. Paul with their homework. Eurell credits his conflict resolution and leadership skills to Minnesota 4-H's Urban Youth Lead program.

Discover 4-H!

Q: *How much free time do kids have nowadays?*

A: Young people have about 1,900 hours of unstructured and unsupervised time each year—the equivalent of a full-time job, according to the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development.

Q: *How will boys and girls do better in school?*

A: 4-H programs have a higher level of intensity, duration and sustained involvement than other youth programs. As a result, 4-H participants have better:

- school attendance
- work habits
- test scores
- interpersonal skills

Q: *Do young people give back to their communities?*

A: Youth who participate in 4-H have significantly higher scores for community contribution—such as volunteering at a hospital or food bank—than those involved in other youth development programs, according to a 2005 study by Tufts University and Boston College.