Raising their hands for young people

4-H volunteers give kids in every Minnesota county opportunities to shape a lifetime.

Rhoda Gust just completed her 40th year of volunteering with University of Minnesota Extension’s 4-H program in northwestern Minnesota’s Roseau County. As a young parent and busy dairy farmer in 1976, she couldn’t imagine having the time. A conversation with Dolores Andol, then the county’s 4-H program coordinator, helped her see how critical her presence was for the youth of her community.

“Dolores turned me toward my boys one day and said ‘Look at them, Rhoda. The time is now. We will always be too busy, but the kids need us today.’”

Gust has invested in hundreds of young people. She has chaperoned the county’s 4-H state fair delegation for 29 years, teaching youth and fellow volunteers how to work together. “I always watch out for the youth who might seem lost or lonely,” she says.

“It’s my responsibility to help them feel safe and do their best.”

This level of volunteer activity requires training, as well as the leadership and support of local 4-H program coordinators. “Rhoda has taught me how important it is to encourage hard work and kindness in our volunteers,” says Sandi Weiland, who leads over 120 4-H volunteers each year in Roseau County. “Leading by example is a value Rhoda models for us; I reflect on that in my job every day.”

Trying something new

Bill and Kim Crowley agreed to coach a 4-H engineering team in Watonwan County after seeing a Rube Goldberg competition at the Minnesota State Fair. A Rube Goldberg machine uses everyday items in a whimsical and complicated way to interact as a series of chain-reaction steps to accomplish a simple task. Bill Crowley thought it looked like a fun way to encourage youth to tinker and explore engineering concepts, a hobby he enjoys.

They signed up with a nephew and worked with their local 4-H program coordinator, Sue Craig, to find other interested young people. Their team met regularly, actively involving each team member in the design and building process.

“To be honest, I wasn’t all that excited about making a Rube Goldberg machine
“When we first got started,” says Kim Crowley. “But their excitement was infectious. Who knew I’d have just as much fun as the kids?”

The Crowleys quickly discovered how many important skills they were helping the kids develop as they built a machine that crushed and recycled a pop can. Tool safety and basic design principles were just the beginning. Cooperation and teamwork were necessary every step of the way. “They needed to practice being a team, learning how to compromise and troubleshoot when things didn’t work. Speaking about their machine with confidence took a lot of practice too,” says Bill Crowley.

The Crowleys have already committed to another year of coaching and hope to find a couple more adults to start a second team.

Luiz Sagrado, Urban 4-H intern, helped his club produce a documentary on homelessness.

Becoming a community member

When Luiz Sagrado immigrated to Minnesota three years ago, 4-H in Hennepin County provided him a place to engage his passion for youth while learning the local culture. As an intern with the Franklin United 4-H Club in Minneapolis, Sagrado supported the club’s members in whatever projects they chose. Last year they produced a documentary about local homelessness and created a community garden.

“I have learned so much right along with the youth of our club,” Sagrado says. “They were patient with me as I learned English, and we worked together to discover how to grow vegetables, make healthy meals and tell stories that make a difference.”

Sagrado’s club members come from different family structures and life experiences, but he says working together has helped them build community and believe in themselves. “I believe that every young person in our group has something special to give. Our role is to help them uncover what those gifts are.”

4-H Volunteers Shape Youth Success

8,228 adult volunteers supported by Extension 4-H staff and training:

LEAD 4-H clubs

TEACH skills

MODEL what it means to be an engaged member of the community

Investment in local 4-H positions ensures that youth development professionals work directly in counties to:

- recruit, train and lead volunteers
- deliver the most effective learning experiences
- share the latest research about youth development

County, public and private funds, with family contributions, combine to ensure 4-H is affordable and accessible to all Minnesota youth.

Youth who have relationships with three or more caring adults who are not their parents are more likely to develop into healthy, caring and responsible adults themselves, and to be successful in college and career.*

Volunteers guide 4-H experiences for over 41,000 kids each year in Minnesota counties and tribal nations.

*Search Institute