

Celebrating 100 years

4-H celebrates a century of service ... OSU celebrates its success

Five score and three months ago, an organization was created “to make the best better.” The motto of the National 4-H Organization has been doing exactly that for the past 100 years.

“Four-H takes the best [students] America has to offer and makes them better through leadership development,” said David Sorrell, executive director of the Oklahoma 4-H Foundation.

This agriculture-based, leadership-development organization is celebrating its 100th birthday.

The National 4-H Organization was created in 1902 in response to young people and their need for better agricultural education. While no individual is credited with being the “father of 4-H,” the collective efforts of many individuals—in true 4-H fashion—made this dream a reality.

Oklahoma 4-H began in Johnston County, W.D. Bentley is credited for being the father of Cooperative Extension and laid the foundation for the 4-H Clubs of Oklahoma. The first club in the state was known as the Corn Club. Originally, the Corn Club was 50 members strong.

“Today, Oklahoma has one of the largest member bodies in the nation with approximately 29,000 members enrolled and more than 150,000 students reached through school enrichment activities,” said Sorrell.

A study conducted by Oklahoma State University graduate student Kyle Worthington showed Oklahoma 4-H members conducted

more than 4 million hours of community service in 2001.

“That is just a significant number any way you look at it,” said Sorrell.

Oklahoma’s 4-H programs are located in all 77 counties through cooperative extension service.

“Because 4-H is in every county, it is very visible and recognized easily throughout the state,” said Charles Cox, state 4-H program leader. “Four-H is at most youth events in the state; it offers a common meeting ground for our youth.”

Four-H offers students from rural areas the opportunity to travel and see things other than small-town Oklahoma.

“It is a chance for them to meet new people from across the state and nation with the same interest,” said Jody House, Johnston County Extension educator. “It makes them break out of their comfort zones, and that is when growth takes place.”

The organization offers a wide array of activities for students ages 9 through 19.

“Four-H gives students an all-around education, from hands-on agricultural education to leadership skills they don’t even know they have received until they are out of 4-H,” said Sorrell.

Many students credit their success in college and life to skills they acquired in 4-H.

“Four-H has given me the skills to follow my ambitions and the self-confidence to achieve those ambitions,” said Marcy Grundmann, agricultural communications junior and former state 4-H officer. “The organizational skills are what I see I have used the most in trying to get through college.”

Past members realize the skills they acquired through 4-H, as do students currently involved in the organization.

“It has given me skills I would not have gotten anywhere else,” said Kyle Foster, junior at Wapanucka High School and vice president of the Johnston County 4-H Club. “I would have never gotten up and spoken in front of a crowd before. I know how to dress properly for the occasion, and I have friends from across the state. This would have never happened without 4-H.”

Oklahoma State University and Oklahoma 4-H have a strong bond.

“You can’t think of Oklahoma 4-H without thinking of OSU,” said House. “They just go together.”

As a land-grant institution, OSU was founded in part because of agriculture. OSU houses the state 4-H offices and is the headquarters for all statewide 4-H activities.

“OSU relies on 4-H as a promotional tool and a recruitment tool,” said Sorrell. “We offer two or three major events every year that bring hundreds of students to the campus.”

Oklahoma 4-H Round-Up brings hundred of students

to the OSU campus every spring for a state meeting, workshops, competitions and fellowship.

“Round-Up is where I first fell in love with OSU,” said Grundmann.

The 4-H office is always adapting and coming up with new ways to get students to the OSU campus. For example, Oklahoma 4-H has sponsored a Cowgirl basketball game for the past two years.

“Last year, we had more than 1,500 students at a Cowgirl basketball game and are expecting a larger turnout this year,” said Cox. “It is really neat to see the look on the students’ faces when they walk into Gallagher-Iba.”

It is ironic to see Oklahoma 4-H using Gallagher-Iba, since Gallagher-Iba was originally known as the 4-H building.

Four-H is the perfect vehicle for connecting youth to campus.

“Many of these students would never have the opportunity to see such a large and beautiful campus if it wasn’t for 4-H,” said Sorrell. “It provides the foundation for a love of agriculture and a love and passion for OSU at an early age. It is the perfect vehicle for connecting youth with youth before they get here [as students].”

The opportunities for travel may be limited for those living in rural Oklahoma.

“I would have never gotten to see OSU if it had not been for 4-H,” said Foster. “OSU is the best college in the state, and I will be there someday!”

As the “best college,” OSU prides itself on being a Truman Scholar institution. Four-H has made its mark within this aspect of OSU. The most common bond between Truman scholars is 4-H.

“Four-H’s leadership development speaks for itself with results like this,” said Cox.

Four-H is also the most common bond among OSU’s Top Ten Freshmen and the College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources’ student government.

The connection between Oklahoma 4-H’ers and OSU is strong before attending college, but it may be even stronger during college. OSU has had the outstanding Collegiate 4-H Club in the nation for the past two years.

“We are the best Collegiate 4-H Club in the nation, and we are the oldest club in the nation,” said Cox.

OSU’s Collegiate 4-H Club was founded in 1916 and is the oldest student organization on campus.

“Collegiate 4-H provides a familiar place students can go, and it helps in the transition from high school to college,” said Cox.

While students are making this transition to college, agriculture is seeing a transition of its own. The industry is seeing a shift from hands-on agriculture to a more technological and corporate outlook.

“We are doing whatever we need to do keep up with these changes,” said Sorrell.

Four-H has developed new curriculum and added contests to keep pace with this evolution in agriculture.

“We have added contests such as digital photography, technological sciences and graphic design,” said Cox.

For 100 years, the National 4-H Organization has upheld its motto. With a history and reputation surpassed by few, the National 4-H Organization will continue to be a key player in the lives of America’s youth, OSU and the future of agriculture. Here’s to another successful century — HAPPY 100th BIRTHDAY, 4-H!

By Whitney Ferris, Connerville, Okla.