



Illinois Extension
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

A gratifying reflection on a journey with Illinois Extension

Joli Pierson, Mason 4-H coordinator, retires from Extension

In preparing for retirement from Illinois Extension after nearly 26 years at the Mason County branch office, Joli Pierson finds herself filled with gratitude and reflection. "What began as a job became a calling, and over the years, it has truly been an honor to serve the people of Mason County through University of Illinois Extension," shared Joli.

She began her Extension career teaching nutrition education in the Family Nutrition Program, which later became SNAP-Education program. She worked directly with students and families, helped them learn practical ways to eat healthier, stretch their food dollars, and build nutrition and fitness habits that supported overall wellness. She always believed that small changes could make a big difference, whether it was helping someone learn how to prepare a healthy meal, use food safety skills, incorporate daily fitness, or make healthier choices, that work was effective and deeply meaningful to her.

In 2012, Joli Pierson stepped into the role of 4-H Extension program coordinator, a transition that opened a new chapter in her Extension journey. As a 4-H alumnus, volunteer, and parent, she was passionate about the 4-H program. "I led my kids' 4-H club for 16 years and was a 4-H judge at the county and state levels," she mentioned. She watched as many of the youth she first connected with through SNAP programming became part of the 4-H program. She enjoyed seeing them grow from students to 4-H members, to 4-H Federation young leaders, and now some are married couples with children on the horizon of their 4-H years. The cycle has come full circle, and those who were once students are now volunteering, serving in leadership roles as Extension Council members, 4-H leaders and volunteers, county fair board members, workshop presenters, and teachers in Mason County schools, where they help promote the county 4-H program.

Joli shares, "Working with 4-H youth, volunteers, and families has been one of the greatest joys of my career. Watching young people grow in confidence, leadership, and responsibility through 4-H experiences will never stop being rewarding." From all that 4-H encompasses, she is constantly reminded of the power of practical learning and supportive adults. Those positive youth-adult relationships where adults show their confidence in youth and in turn, the youth exude self-confidence. "I cherish seeing youth challenge themselves, try new things, and discover their own potential. Those moments — when a young person recognizes their own capabilities— are memories I will cherish forever."

Working alongside dedicated volunteers is what Joli valued most. Their commitment to youth and community strengthened every program, and she is incredibly grateful for their partnership. 4-H Special Interest Clubs and workshops brought skilled volunteers to teach their passions to youth, such as gardening, stitching, photography, cooking, engineering, robotics, and shooting sports— all programs which met real needs and strengthened our community. "I am proud of what we accomplished and am forever grateful for the relationships built along the way," shared Joli.

Joli shared that throughout her career, she was fortunate to work with a supportive Extension and 4-H staff, and community partners who believed in the mission of Extension. Working together they collaborated to provide research-based programs and special events for adults and youth, such as "Dining with Diabetes", "Serve it Safe", and "Polite is Right", and "Welcome to the Real World" programs, National Weather Service Storm Spotter Training, and Outdoor Event Weather Training, IEPA Household Hazardous Waste Collection event, Safe Trick-or-Treat Night, Farm Safety Day, Mason County 4-H Discovery Day, and many more. Her experiences define her Extension journey, and lead Joli to share the accomplishments of her career, "Illinois 4-H and Extension programs thrive due to the dedication of volunteers, partners, and Extension staff all working *together*."



As she steps into retirement from Illinois Extension, Joli Pierson shared, "I do so with appreciation for the experiences, the people, knowledge gained, and the purpose that Extension provided me for so many years. I leave knowing that Extension's work and mission will continue to grow, led by passionate staff and volunteers who care deeply about the community. Thank you to everyone who walked this journey with me. It has truly been a privilege."