



Karla Belzer County Director



Front Cover Picture By:
Evelyn Sims is twelve years
old and a member of the
Wyoming Indians 4-H club
in Lee County. She loves
learning about photography
from her neighbor, who is
a photographer. She likes
taking pictures of nature
and animals. Her other
4-H projects include Child
Development, Visual Arts,
Floriculture, and Rabbits.

Our hands have been busy cultivating growth in Carroll, Lee and Whiteside counties

As I reflect on the past year, it fills me with joy to share the impactful moments that Illinois Extension has woven into the fabric of our communities in Carroll, Lee, and Whiteside Counties. Our journey in 2023 has been guided by the themes of "hands" and "hearts," symbolizing the active involvement and genuine care we bring to the lives we touch.

Our hands have been busy cultivating growth, literally and metaphorically. Whether supporting learning through new programming or providing opportunities for youth to thrive, we have seen tremendous growth in our Horticulture and 4-H programs. At our garden programs, youth and adults expand their knowledge of gardening and the natural environment. Our Master Gardeners stand ready to assist the community through their programming and expert assistance. Entering into an agreement for enhanced agriculture education with Sauk Valley Community College promises to help college students and community members alike grow both in knowledge and understanding.

In 4-H, we've witnessed the revival of a vital project area, the development of life skills through learning by doing, and the expansion of opportunities for youth throughout the area. Young hands caring for rabbits, engaging in artistic expression, discovering the benefits of movement, and exploring health careers not only cultivate responsibility but also grow skills – truly a testament to our dedication to supporting thriving youth.

Our hearts have been at the center of our efforts to build a strong and connected community. Our SNAP-Ed program has addressed the local challenge of food insecurity in innovative ways through the creation of Share Tables and the Walk for Hunger community event. Through brain health programming, participants not only enhance their cognitive skills but also enjoy a sense of community and shared purpose.

Unmistakably, at the heart of many of our efforts are our dedicated volunteers. Their passion and commitment to the 4-H, Master Gardener, and Master Naturalist programs is unmatched, and we honor their efforts.

As we move forward, let our hands continue to sow the seeds of knowledge, and our hearts beat in unison, fostering a sense of belonging and connectedness. Together, we'll continue to shape a future where individuals and families in Carroll, Lee, and Whiteside Counties thrive.

Thank you for being a vital part of our Illinois Extension family and for your continued support. Here's to another year of growth, learning, and heartfelt connections.

Warm regards, Karla Belzer



Illinois Extension Makes an Impact

The University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign's land-grant mission thrives each day through Extension's programs, resources, knowledge, and dedicated staff that are responsive to five grand challenge themes:



Community:

Support Strong and Resilient Residents



Economy:

Grow a Prosperous Economy



Environment:

Sustain Natural Resources at Home and in Public Spaces



Food:

Maintain a Safe and Accessible Food Supply



Health:

Maximize Physical, Mental, and Emotional Health

2023 Engagement

Extension leaders, staff, and stakeholders define priorities that create meaningful, mission-centered outcomes throughout the state:

657 Communities Served	745K+ Program Attendees	12.7M+ Webpage Views	58.5M+ Social Media Impressions	1.8M+ YouTube Views
555 Educational Sessions/Week (28K+ Annually)	90 Online Courses Accessed by 12K+ People	10,158 Local Government Education Webinar Reach	1,799 4-H Clubs	199,400 4-H Experiences

Partnerships

Resource Generation

5,682 Program Volunteers 274 Community Gardens 2,634
School and
Community
Partners

\$15,259,785 Value of Volunteer Contributions \$463,368

Value of Donated

Produce Grown or

Facilitated

\$4M+ External Funds Secured for SNAP-Ed Partners

Gordon Kelm's 4-H legacy inspires generations of growth and service



Gordon Kelm, as a new 4-H leader attending the state fair, helping a 4-H member show corn.

In 1973, Gordon Kelm's first year as a 4-H volunteer, the minimum wage was \$1.60 per hour, gas cost 40 cents a gallon, and a loaf of bread was 29 cents. George Foreman was the heavyweight boxing champion, the Vietnam War officially ended, and Secretariat won the triple crown. While many things have changed over the past 50 years, what remains constant is Gordon Kelm's steadfast dedication, compassion, and commitment to the 4-H program in Whiteside County.

How many people do you know who are so dedicated to any organization that they have volunteered with all their heart for 50 years? Throughout the tapestry of time, some individuals weave themselves seamlessly into the foundation of an organization, leaving an indelible mark that transcends years and moments. To say we are grateful and honored to have Gordon as a part of the Whiteside 4-H family is an understatement.

Gordon's impact spans a vast terrain within the realm of 4-H. His three decades at the helm of the 4-H camp, coaching softball, leading his club, and contributing tirelessly to federation and 4-H events highlights a commitment that goes beyond the call of duty. From setting up and tearing down the 4-H show to recording ribbons and winners, judging at the fair, and extending his expertise to award applications, Gordon has been the heartbeat of our 4-H community.

Yet, it is not just about the tasks accomplished; it is about the lives touched and the spirit of 4-H that Gordon embodies. His fingerprints are on every aspect of the organization building cages for poultry, fixing countless things, and offering unwavering support to staff, families, and every child fortunate enough to cross his path. Gordon is a one-of-a-kind force, a living testament to what it means to live and breathe 4-H.

To commemorate Gordon's 50-year milestone, we sought a tribute that would match the magnitude of his contribution. A mere plaque or trophy would not suffice. We wanted him to tangibly feel the gratitude of those whose lives he has touched. With the collaboration of past and present volunteers and camp counselors, we embarked on a journey to collect memories, stories, and expressions of thanks.

Letters poured in, each containing a piece of the mosaic that is Gordon's legacy. Memories shared by those he mentored, stories that illuminate his impact, and heartfelt expressions of gratitude—all bundled together in a box, a treasure trove of appreciation. This gesture aimed not only to recognize Gordon but also to show him the profound ripple effect of his dedication.

In truth, it is challenging to envision 4-H without Gordon. His service and friendship have become integral threads in the rich fabric of our organization. Thank you, Gordon, for 50 years of selfless service, passion, and friendship. Your legacy lives on in the countless lives you have touched, evidence of the power of your enduring commitment.



4-H EPC Allie Johnston and County Director Karla Belzer presenting an award to Gordon Kelm.







Revival of Happy Hoppers Rabbit Club

Following the departure of a significant adult leader in 2019, the Carroll County 4-H rabbit project area faced a significant setback. While interest in the rabbit project area grew, many youth participants found themselves lacking the essential skills for handling rabbits, resulting in frequent bewilderment over the judge's instructions and general confusion at the 4-H rabbit show. As this new challenge emerged, it became a pivotal moment that solidified the commitment to a solution to ensure the long-term sustainability of the rabbit project area and provide a quality show experience for interested youth.

Recognizing the need for a solution, youth and adults joined forces to re-establish the Happy Hoppers rabbit club. The decision was not just about reviving a club; it was a commitment to revitalizing a sense of purpose within the 4-H community.

Since its revival, the impact has been remarkable. The once-dormant club now boasts an active membership of 10 enthusiastic kids and a total of 15 dedicated rabbit project members. The revitalized club has not only regained its momentum but has also opened its doors wide, welcoming three new 4-H members into the group.

Beyond the numbers, the Happy Hoppers has become a platform for youth development. Members are gaining knowledge about their project rabbits and learning valuable life skills including the importance of responsibility through consistently attending meetings, actively participating in organized club activities, and mastering parliamentary procedures to run meetings effectively.



A pair of Thomson Sandburrs 4-H Club members geared up for the upcoming rabbit show.

The impact of the Happy Hoppers resonates far beyond the boundaries of the rabbit project area. It is a testament to the transformative power of dedicated individuals coming together to revive a sense of purpose, instill life skills in the younger generation, and strengthen the very fabric of the 4-H community. The narrative of the Happy Hoppers serves as an inspiration, reminding us that even in the face of setbacks, a community united in purpose can create a ripple effect of positive change.





Artistic triumph at Lee County 4-H Show

The 2023 Lee County Fair & 4-H Show was a testament to the incredible talents and dedication of local 4-H youth, with over 800 general project entries. The show, highlighting the diverse interests and skills of the participating youth, was a celebration of dedication, hard work, and the amazing things you can learn by doing.

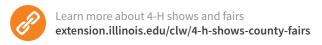
Among numerous project areas, the visual arts project area captured the attention of participants, onlookers, and judges. The vibrant display of creativity in Lee County revealed a deep love for art. The horticulture and goat project areas were also popular this year, adding their unique charm to the fair.

However, it wasn't just about the numbers or the projects themselves. The 4-H show provided a stage for personal growth, giving young people the chance to show off their creations and express their thoughts. These moments not only improved their communication skill but also gave them confidence for the future.

A notable part of the show was the visual arts department, where judges had the tricky job of picking the top 25 projects for an exclusive exhibition at the Next Picture Show in Dixon. The talent on display was impressive, with over 150 entries competing for recognition. The judges had a tough time choosing from so many exceptional projects.

One standout participant was Grace Cochrane, a dedicated member of the Grove Go Getters 4-H Club. With ten years in 4-H, Grace's commitment to her craft was clear. Her passion for visual arts stood out, earning her a special spot in the prestigious art exhibition. Grace's club leader mentioned how this experience made her feel like a "real artist."

Grace showcased her skills in various mediums, including clay and chalk/carbon/pigment on canvas, paper, or glass. Her portfolio included beautifully crafted clay mushrooms and a colorful illustration of Lorelai's house from the popular TV show "Gilmore Girls."



The impact of the Lee County Fair & 4-H Show went beyond the event itself. For Grace and many others, it was a stepping stone toward their artistic dreams. Grace is now pursuing her passion at Sauk Valley Community College, aiming to major in graphic arts or interior decorating. The show played a crucial role in shaping the dreams and futures of these young artists with its focus on nurturing talent and providing a platform for expression. As the echoes of the show linger, the community can take pride in witnessing the growth of creativity and the emergence of a new generation of artists inspired by the transformative experience of the Lee County Fair & 4-H Show.



Grace Cochrane's artistic flair shines bright at the fair, a testament to 4-H excellence in creativity and skill.

Carroll, Lee and Whiteside 4-H



1677 Fair Exhibits



5914-H club membership



48 4-H clubs



4-H Educator Danielle Gapinski shares the dance floor with enthusiastic students, creating memories that go beyond the classroom.



Get Up and Dance: Fostering fitness and fun through movement education

Although the World Health Organization suggests young people engage in moderate-to-vigorous activity for an average of 60 minutes per day, research indicates that 80% of youth engage in less activity than the recommended amount. Consequences of inactivity in youth can create a domino effect of long-term physical and mental health concerns. The 4-H Get Up and Dance program aims to encourage youth to be more active while introducing them to various dance styles in a fun, approachable way.

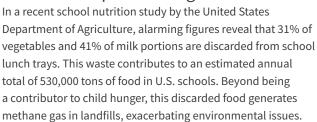
The program features a multi-tiered approach of introducing lessons in strength, flexibility, endurance, mindfulness, rhythm, and balance before diving into dance styles of ballet, jazz, contemporary, hip hop, and kick. Participants draw connections between the importance of each of the foundational elements in not only dance but also in their activities and daily lives. By demonstrating the importance of movement, youth learn that the risk of injuries and health issues can be reduced or eliminated.

While dance may not be for everyone, youth are encouraged to try the skill before passing judgment on the dance style, which helps them explore options and broaden their horizons while learning something new. By engaging in each dance style, youth get a small introduction through activities and games that are intended to show that dance can be a fun physical activity that can be implemented outside of a traditional dance studio setting. Sessions engage youth in thirty to forty-five minutes of moving and grooving activity towards their daily sixty-minute goal.

Sterling-Rock Falls YMCA's after-school program was the first community partner to participate in the Get Up and Dance program. Interest quickly spread to Franklin and Jefferson Elementary Schools in Sterling, reaching 95 Kindergarten through second-grade youth. Excitement is building as plans to deliver the program at additional local elementary schools are well underway. The curriculum has ignited the interest of other Extension staff and has been selected as a feature workshop session at the Ignite by 4-H Teen Summit in Washington, D.C.

As we witness the ripple effect of positive change and growing interest in movement education, we stand united in our commitment to empowering youth, fostering healthier habits, and inspiring a lifelong love for movement. The Get Up and Dance program is not just teaching dance; it's nurturing a passion for well-being and setting the stage for a brighter, healthier future for our youth and communities.

Share table sparks change



Merrill Elementary School in Rock Falls has taken a proactive approach to tackle this problem. Through the introduction of a share table, supported by the University of Illinois Extension, the school has initiated a positive ripple effect to combat food waste. This initiative, bolstered by the SNAP-Ed program, not only addresses food insecurity but also fosters a sense of community and environmental responsibility among students, emphasizing nutrition education.

The impact of the share table extends beyond its primary goal. It acts as a catalyst for instilling values of empathy and generosity among students, fostering a culture of caring within the school community. Merrill Elementary School is not just redistributing meals; it is nurturing a generation of socially conscious and environmentally aware individuals who understand the power of collective action in addressing societal challenges and making healthier food choices. The share table has become a symbol of transformative change, leaving a lasting impression on the hearts and minds of the students.



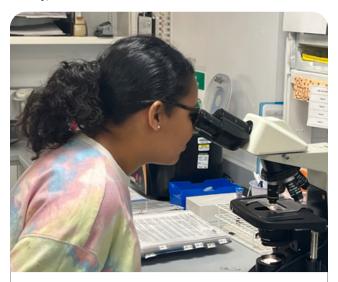
The share cart at Merrill Elementary School in Rock Falls.





Microbiology, physical therapy, and imaging – who knew?

When fifth-grade students are asked about possible career opportunities, they might not typically think of options in the medical field beyond a job as a doctor or a nurse. During Health Jam, youth are given an up-close view of the many positions possible at KSB Hospital through onsite department tours. Health Jam is a seven-week partnership with Illinois Extension staff and Dixon Madison Elementary physical education teachers. Students learn about health, wellness, physical activity, and healthcare careers.



A student explores the microscopic world with awe and wonder.

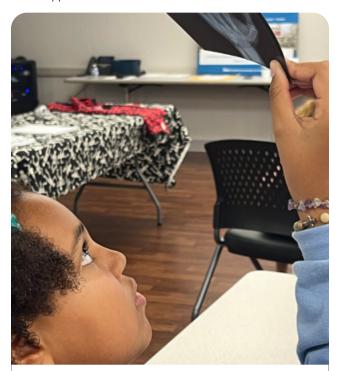
Healthcare occupations are projected to grow much faster than the average for all occupations from 2022 to 2032, according to the US Bureau of Statistics. About 1.8 million openings are projected each year due to employment growth and the need to replace workers. These job opportunities provide many options for our future workforce.

To provide youth with an introduction to potential careers, KSB staff educated 198 students about their daily responsibilities and the education needed for employment. During the KSB tour, the youth learned about tests and equipment that microbiologists use in the laboratory. Staff in the lab explained that their job involves gathering many pieces of information and is like solving a puzzle using various technology. The physical therapy department provided the students with firsthand experiences of learning how to help patients improve their balance. Youth learned the importance of sight when using various therapy equipment. Staff from imaging provided a look at x-rays and shared the role they perform during surgeries to assist the doctors.

Opportunities such as the KSB Health Jam tours provide sparks to help youth develop an interest in potential jobs. One student commented that after participating in Health Jam, they wanted to learn more about being a microbiologist. Another fifth grader plans to explore physical therapy careers. Many other options are available to our future medical field employees, and programs like this can allow exploration of those opportunities.

In addition to the KSB tours, students participating in Health Jam learn about the importance of health, wellness, and physical activity. As part of the seven-week in-class instruction, students learn about making healthy food choices, proper handwashing, brain health, increasing daily physical activity, and other important health-related topics. Illinois Extension provides this collaborative program in partnership with KSB Hospital, University of Illinois College of Medicine Rockford, and the Illinois Area Health Education Center.

Illinois Extension is strategically positioned to continue providing Health Jam in partnership with our dedicated partners. With ongoing support, Health Jam and other Illinois Extension programs maximize health outcomes and future career opportunities for rural children in northern Illinois.



A student examines an x-ray while learning about how x-rays and imaging work.





Walk for Hunger raises hope and fights food insecurity

In 2022, the reality of food insecurity in the United States became stark, with Feeding America reporting 44 million people, including 13 million children, living in food-insecure households. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) noted a 31% surge in food insecurity for all individuals and a staggering 44% increase for children compared to the previous year, marking the highest rates since 2014. In the U.S., 1 in 9 children and 1 in 14 seniors faced the harsh reality of food insecurity, making it a pressing public health issue.

Locally, Carroll, Lee, and Whiteside counties saw an estimated 10,030 individuals lacking access to enough nutritious food. In response, Illinois Extension collaborated with the Sauk Valley Food Bank to organize a Walk for Hunger event to combat local food insecurity. Participants, gathering at Centennial Park in Rock Falls, not only raised awareness but also contributed healthy shelf-stable food items during check-in.



An employee eagerly anticipates the arrival of participants.

The event went beyond awareness, incorporating an educational approach to well-being. Whiteside County Master Gardeners, Master Naturalists, and SNAP-Ed collaborated to enhance the impact. Following the Centennial Park path, the walk featured activity stations at shelters, where volunteers engaged participants in environmentally focused activities promoting physical and mental well-being.

Educational experiences ranged from measuring wind speed and creating paper kites at the "Wild & Wacky Weather" booth to pollinating like bees and crafting butterfly lifecycle bracelets at the "Pollinator Celebration" booth. Activities also included discovering insect mouth parts and matching Illinois wild mammal pelts to their skulls.

The community's response was overwhelming, with over 100 pounds of food collected and delivered to the Sauk Valley Food Bank for distribution to local pantries, providing immediate relief to those facing food insecurity. As food insecurity rates are expected to rise, Illinois Extension remains a critical collaborator, providing awareness and supportive programming to address this growing national crisis through grassroots efforts.



Participants generously contributed to the Walk for Hunger donation box.





Lanark Community Garden thrives with Learning in Lawn Chairs program

In a significant collaboration this year, Illinois Extension partnered with the Lanark Community Garden to enhance food access and awareness in Carroll County, with a specific focus on the town of Lanark. This collaboration aimed to cultivate not only vegetables but also knowledge and awareness. Playing the role of mentor, Illinois Extension offered the Learning in Lawn Chairs series at the Lanark Community Garden, fostering a sense of unity and purpose among the local gardening community. Extension carefully crafted monthly educational sessions from May to October to demonstrate various vegetable cultivation techniques.

Each month, the 90-minute session provided gardeners with the opportunity to learn and grow their knowledge and skills. From unconventional straw bale growing to planting potatoes and tomatoes in large containers, the garden became a canvas for innovation. The cow panel hoop trellis, where beans climbed gracefully, stood as a testament to the garden's potential as well as the learners' dedication to the program. A standout event in the series was the "bring your favorite tool" show and tell, celebrating gardening tools and forging connections among participants.

A positive aspect of the program was the involvement of individuals who recently relocated from the suburbs to retire in rural Carroll County. For them, this partnership offered more than a chance to cultivate a garden; it provided a gateway to a new chapter enriched by the joys of gardening. However, as the garden grew, challenges appeared, with wildlife becoming a tough opponent. Deer and raccoons became

Community garden participants showcase the art of gardening with hands-on tool demonstrations.

the main characters in a common challenge shared among participants. Talks centered around strategies to deal with wildlife impact and building camaraderie in facing shared challenges. The focus turned to alternative methods, especially container gardening, letting participants adapt to geographical constraints.

Guided discussions turned challenges into chances for solving problems together. The community garden became a physical space for growing vegetables and a symbolic space for cultivating ideas, building resilience, and nurturing connections. As each monthly session ended, the impact of this partnership echoed beyond the garden. It became a spark for change, starting discussions about sustainable living, community teamwork, and human strength in tough times. Illinois Extension and the Lanark Community Garden had planted the seeds of a flourishing, connected community, ready to bloom for seasons to come.



Sowing the seeds of change, one garden at a time

Embarking on a mission to cultivate gardens and sow the seeds of change in the community, the Whiteside County Master Gardeners collaborated with the city of Rock Falls and Sterling Township to create two community gardens this year. Both gardens address the pressing issue of maintaining a safe and accessible food supply and contribute to the community's wellbeing.

Taking root in a low-income neighborhood in Rock Falls, Master Gardeners offered free garden plots to individuals on a firstcome, first-served basis. The need for affordable and nutritious food is particularly pronounced in the community, and the plots became canvases for community members to paint their visions of a healthier, more self-sufficient future.

Simultaneously, another garden was formed at the Sterling Township's new site in Sterling. This expansion highlighted the Master Gardeners' commitment to inclusivity and accessibility, reaching beyond the confines of a single neighborhood to benefit the wider community. Here, too, free plots were generously provided, ensuring that all could access and learn to grow a food supply.

At both gardens, the Master Gardeners did not simply hand over plots of land; they sowed the seeds of knowledge and empowerment while guiding participants through the world of gardening. Using their wealth of experience and expertise, these dedicated volunteers provided invaluable advice and instruction on planting, maintenance, and harvesting. This mentorship approach transformed the community gardens into outdoor classrooms, where novices and seasoned gardeners cultivated crops, skills, and a sense of community.

To enhance each garden space, volunteers were present on-site once a week, ready to lend a helping hand, share a word of encouragement, or answer any questions that arose. Weekly interaction forged connections, transforming the community gardens into more than just spaces for growing vegetables. The gardens became hubs for social interaction, education, and mutual support.

The Master Gardeners' vision was further nurtured by the generosity of the CGH Foundation, which provided essential monetary support. This funding ensured the community gardens were equipped with the necessary tools, seeds, and plants, laying the groundwork for a flourishing harvest.

Because of the care and dedication of the Master Gardeners throughout the growing season, the donation garden yielded an astonishing 2,738 pounds of fresh produce. Recognizing the potential for the harvest to make a meaningful community impact, the Master Gardeners donated the harvest to organizations in the Sterling/Rock Falls area that address food insecurity.

In the end, the Whiteside County Master Gardeners, in collaboration with the city of Rock Falls and Sterling Township, did more than cultivate gardens; they cultivated hope, resilience, and a tangible solution to the pressing issue of maintaining a safe and accessible food supply. Through their unwavering commitment to community, education, and collaboration, they sowed the seeds of a healthier, more sustainable future for all.



Growing Together: Community Garden partnerships in full bloom.

Total Impact: Food access, production, and safety



12,137 Program Attendance



Educational Sessions



Partnerships with emergency food sites and other organizations



Active Food donation gardens



Lee County Master Gardeners shine

At the Master Gardener State Conference, two Lee County Master Gardeners were recognized and honored for their outstanding contributions, showcasing their depth of expertise and enthusiasm for garden programming. Joyce Bettner, a beacon of gardening knowledge, actively imparts her wisdom to various groups and individuals throughout the county. Her commitment is evident through her leadership in numerous initiatives, including the development and facilitation of summer horticulture lessons at the Franklin Grove library. Joyce's engagement extends to manning the Master Gardener help desk, delivering educational programs to youth, mentoring new Master Gardeners, and contributing to county display gardens. Her influential leadership has significantly contributed to the growth of the Master Gardener program in Lee County.

Another distinguished awardee, Zack Moss, stands out as a remarkable asset to various projects such as the Junior Garden, Kids in the Kitchen, and Dixon Community Gardens. Zack's exceptional positive attitude and unwavering willingness to assist make him a standout volunteer. Throughout the growing season, he dedicates himself to developing and presenting lessons at the Junior Garden and Kids in the Kitchen programs. Beyond this, Zack plays a vital role in supporting the community by supplying seedlings for the annual Plant Sale and maintaining plants in a nearby greenhouse. His efforts include six years of dedicated service on the Dixon Community Garden Committee, demonstrating his outstanding commitment. The recognition of these Master Gardeners at the state conference exemplifies the invaluable impact they have on their communities and the Master Gardener program.



Zack Moss and Joyce Bettner honored with State Master Gardener awards.



Master Gardener Nancy Gmitro enlightens group with a program on maximizing herbs from your garden for herbal vinegars.

Master Gardener cultivates enriching series at the library

Carroll County Master Gardener Nancy Gmitro spearheaded a dynamic monthly gardening series at the Savanna Library, addressing a notable gap in community programming and fostering environmental awareness.

The series kicked off with "Spring Wildflowers," followed by "Cooking with Herbs," where participants explored culinary applications of herbs. Next was "Tea Gardens," focusing on cultivating herbs for personalized tea blends, followed by "Pressed Flowers," showcasing creative uses for preserved botanicals.

The series then shifted to "Fall Decor," inspiring attendees to create seasonal decorations, and concluded with "Herbal Vinegars," offering hands-on experience crafting varieties of herbal vinegar with locally grown herbs.

The success of these monthly gatherings was evident in the positive response from both adults and youth, fostering community engagement and a shared interest in gardening. Beyond immediate success, the initiative marked a milestone as the first sustained and diverse program of its kind presented by Master Gardeners in the area.

Participants not only gained practical knowledge but developed a deeper connection with the environment. The initiative successfully addressed the community's need for environmental education, providing a platform for future collaborations and expanded programming.

This monthly gardening series at the Savanna Library has made a lasting impact on the community, cultivating interest in gardening, sustainability, and environmental stewardship. This initiative filled a void in community programming and fostered a sense of community engagement that is poised to endure in the future.





Saturdays with a Master Gardener transforming community life

Curious about the ins and outs of seed collecting? Interested in how to transform the natural landscape? Inquisitive about companion planting? Throughout the year, community members in Whiteside County had the opportunity to engage and embark on a journey of discovery through the Saturday with a Master Gardener program series. Beyond just learning about the difference between an herb and a spice or the art of arranging cut flowers, Saturdays with a Master Gardener became an interactive educational event that transformed home and community landscapes in Whiteside County and beyond.

Entering the third year of the program series, the Whiteside County Master Gardeners became catalysts for change, fostering a deeper connection between individuals and their surroundings. Once a month, participants engaged in lessons that enhanced their understanding and challenged them with new skills and expertise.



Participants at the floral design workshop bringing their creativity to life.

As participants discovered that gardening was more than just a weekend hobby, they also learned about the numerous ways gardening contributes to both individual and community well-being. Embracing the role of mentors, the Master Gardeners used their wealth of expertise to guide enthusiasts on transforming ordinary landscapes into vibrant, thriving ecosystems.



Throughout the series, community members learned the art of sustainable gardening practices, including soil enrichment and water conservation, to nurture life and foster biodiversity in their backyards. Master Gardeners readily shared insights on companion planting, toxic plants, and the magic of seed collecting, turning backyards into mini ecosystems that flourished with life. By the time the series concluded, the landscapes of Whiteside County were remarkably transformed. Community members had not only learned the intricacies of horticulture but had embraced a lifestyle that harmonized with the natural world.



Nancy Strock receives a swag bag from the Master Gardeners, acknowledging her as the winner in the series.

The Saturday with a Master Gardener series not only imparted knowledge but sowed the seeds of a sustainable, connected, and enriched community. Whiteside County has become a living testament to the power of engagement with home and community landscapes—a story of growth, harmony, and the enduring beauty of nature.



Master Gardener and Naturalist Volunteers



2,764 Total Volunteer Hours



\$90,331 Value of Volunteer Labor



Entrepreneurship education in Illinois' high schools: An active-learning concept to help secure a community's future

There's no question that rural communities in the U.S. face declining population challenges. An additional issue is that many rural areas have policies that are insufficient for supporting entrepreneurial activity. In some mid-western states, the rate of rural entrepreneurship has decreased by 50% since 1978.

As entrepreneurship is known to be a driver of job growth, a continued decline in the rate of rural entrepreneurial activity will depress employment opportunities for all rural workers, including the best and brightest of the younger generation. However, policies that support rural entrepreneurship can stabilize and expand rural employment opportunities and provide a reason for the younger generation to stay in their rural communities or return to them after testing the waters in larger cities.

To better inform local leaders of policy options for support of rural entrepreneurship, Mike Delany, a community and economic development educator serving Carroll, Lee, and Whiteside Counties, provided the webinar "Entrepreneurship Education in Illinois' High Schools." The webinar highlighted two programs used in northwestern Illinois high schools to introduce students to entrepreneurship and give them experience with the concepts of business creation and development. Speakers included LeAndra Hartman of the Whiteside Area Career Center's CEO program and Aaron Sitze, who created a social entrepreneurship program at Oregon High School.

For participants in attendance, the lively session offered an enlightening back-and-forth discussion. Both presenters highlighted learning environments and practices that are popular among the targeted student populations and effectively convey the intended introduction to the entrepreneurial environment.

At the conclusion of the live broadcast, at least 95% percent of the respondents reported the program had increased their familiarity with models for entrepreneurship education at the high school level. This increased familiarity has the potential to incentivize attendees to put the acquired information to use and create new entrepreneurship programming in the region. The full presentation is available on YouTube on the Illinois Extension Community Economic Development channel by searching for "entrepreneurship education."



County Director Karla Belzer signs agreement with SVCC President David Hellmich.

Sauk Valley Community College initiates collaboration with Illinois Extension



Careers in agriculture are incredibly important to support our growing communities and world. With the current U.S. population estimated at over 300 million people, agricultural careers focusing on food production are a top priority. With the world population expected to increase to 9.6 billion over the next three decades, there will be a need to increase production by 70%, making careers in agriculture in high demand. Agriculture careers also address critical issues beyond production, like ecology and environmental protection.

To expand agriculture education programs, Sauk Valley Community College and University of Illinois Extension entered into an agreement that includes providing greenhouse coordination, horticulture instruction, Master Gardener consultation on the Sauk campus, and non-credit community programs focused on agriculture.

This agreement with University of Illinois Extension provides for a new hands-on learning opportunity for our students and for our community.

SVCC President David Hellmich

Through the agreement, SVCC students will have the opportunity for firsthand experience in horticulture and greenhouse growing techniques. Additionally, non-credit programs will be offered for the community to learn about agriculture and horticulture on SVCC's campus. University of Illinois Extension Educators and Master Gardeners will facilitate all instruction.

Delighted to collaborate with SVCC on this project, Illinois Extension is committed to cultivating knowledge and sowing the seeds of sustainability while growing the bonds of collaboration within the community. With the greenhouse becoming fully operational and programming starting in early 2024, Illinois Extension anticipates tremendous growth in this project over the next year and the years to come.

Thank you to the individuals and businesses who locally supported our funding efforts in 2023.

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1st Gateway Credit Union	Fairhaven Township	In Memory of Jennifer Thompson	Odds N Ends HCE Unit			
A.C. Mccartney	Farmers National Bank	•	Palmyra Township			
Ackland Family	The First National Bank in Amboy	In Memory of Katherine Reynolds	Peterson Farm			
Adolph Red Angus	Forth Family	In Memory of Susan Young	Prophetstown Farmers Mutual Ins Co			
Blain's Farm & Fleet of Sterling Block Family	Franklin Grove Public Library	In Memory of Otto & Thelma Oleson	Rock Falls Township High School			
Boehle Family	Franklin Grove Township	Jacoby Family	Sauk Valley Area Chamber			
Carroll County Farm Bureau	Gentry Family Gorman Farms Trucking	Keim Family Kiwanis Club	Sawyer Family			
CGH Medical Center	Hahnaman Township	Koster Family	Stenzel Family			
Chadwick Lamplighters HCE Unit	Hand Family	Lake Carroll Women's Club	Sterling Federal Bank			
Clark Carroll Insurance Agency	Hoyles Just Right Feeds	Lee County Extension Foundation	Sullivan's Foods Treter Family			
Community State Bank	Hugh F. Miller Insurance Agency	Lee County HEA	United Hairlines			
Consolidated Grain & Barge	In Memory of Allan Esgar	Lee County Pork Producers	Whitmer Family			
Culver's of Rock Falls Dickson Family	In Memory of Charles Hammond	Lyndon Township	Willow Creek Township			
Dollinger Tree Farm	In Memory of Cheri Bakes	McCormick Nursery & Landscaping	Woodland Township			
Dwayne Harridge Family	In Memory of Donald Ramsdell	Morrison Veterinary Clinic				
Elkhorn Grove Township	In Memory of Herb Combs	Northern IL Diesel, Inc				

Extension Council Members

Thank you to the individuals who serve on our CLW Extension Council. The Extension Council guides Extension staff when determining programming and outreach efforts.

Carroll County

Lee Reese, Lanark Marcia Zell, Mt. Carroll Deeann Kramer, Thomson

Lee County

Karen Stenzel, Amboy Melissa Feit, Dixon Jennifer Lang, Dixon Emily Zimmerman, Dixon Eileen Piper, Amboy

Whiteside County

Daniel Swihart, Sterling Gordon Kelm, Tampico Teresa Galloway, Galt AJ Segneri, Sterling Mark Ward, Prophetstown Abbey DeShane, Erie Cilvia Rivera, Sterling





WHITESIDE COUNTY STAFF

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Mike Delany CED Educator Martha Ebbesmeyer 4-H & Youth Educator

Danielle Gapinski 4-H & Youth Educator

Kara Schweitzer Family Life Educator Allie Johnston 4-H Program Coordinator

Mary Nelson Ag/Natural Resources Program Coordinator

Marcia Cruse SNAP-ED Program Coordinator Emma Stull

SNAP-ED Community Worker

Ana Smith

SNAP-Ed Community Worker

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If you need a reasonable accommodation to participate, please contact the event coordinator. Early requests are strongly encouraged to allow sufficient time to meet your needs.

College of Agricultural, Consumer & Environmental Sciences

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