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AmeriCorps volunteers tackle projects at Arkansas 4-H Center

A group of AmeriCorps volunteers put their minds and muscles to work in central Arkansas, improving the C.A. Vines Arkansas 4-H Center with projects great and small during the final months of 2024.

Nine AmeriCorps volunteers from throughout the United States completed a variety of roofing, electrical and groundskeeping projects at the center, where the team stayed until Dec. 13.

Shannon Caldwell, extension 4-H Center program director, said this group is the ninth AmeriCorps team to “make their mark on the 4-H Center.”

“The evidence of past teams’ impacts can be seen all around the 4-H Center campus,” Caldwell said. “AmeriCorps team members are hardworking young adults with a true heart for service. Their volunteer work allows us to expand opportunities in an efficient and affordable way. While the AmeriCorps teams never really see the full impact of their work, every person who visits the 4-H Center is benefitting from their time with us.”

Caldwell said past AmeriCorps teams have assisted with LED lighting conversion across the campus, saving the center more than 1 million kilowatts of electricity each year. They have also sorted and recycled 7.5 tons of materials, established and maintained trails and assisted the Arkansas Forestry Commission in a 43-acre controlled burn to reduce the risk of wildfire and “encourage revival of native flora,” she said.

After completing training in Colorado, the team arrived at the center on Nov. 7. It was the first site for the team’s 10-month service term.

“Our first project was removing a bunch of willow weed, an invasive species, from Lake Laverne,” said volunteer Cydney Henson. “I think we removed 22,000 pounds — we knocked



A group of nine AmeriCorps volunteers completed a variety of projects at the C.A. Vines Arkansas 4-H Center. From left to right: Kathleen Galdi, Victor Colque, Chay Bilderbeck, Ava Zyhowski, Lindsey Klingberg, Jonae King, Emily Willis, Niko Voltzikos, Cydney Henson.

it out in less than three days. We’d spent a lot of time in training, so we were ready to go.”

The team made repairs to the Berner Pavilion roof and installed new shingles on the pool house roof. They also used an electric lift to install lighting in a large new storage building on the campus, which Caldwell said will allow program staff to move into the new facility and free up space in other areas on the campus. In the same building, the group installed plywood panels along the inner perimeter to create walls.

Volunteer Jonae King, 23, from Las Vegas, Nevada, said she has enjoyed the variety of the projects her group has been working on.

“I can’t say I have a favorite skill quite yet — I love everything that we’re doing,” she said. “It’s physically and mentally challenging. We’re glad to be pitching in and helping.”

Read more [here](#).

THE INSIDE STORIES

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Extension agents, staff honored for excellence



Faculty and staff at the Cooperative Extension Service celebrated a successful year of serving Arkansas families and communities— from starting Crittenden County’s first farmers market to creating professional development opportunities to teach college students about agriculture in Arkansas.

The extension service recognized employees for their excellence and innovation on Dec. 2 during its annual employee conference at the state office in Little Rock.

John D. Anderson, extension director, commended this year’s winners for their excellence and innovation and commitment to the Division of Agriculture’s mission of strengthening agriculture, communities and families by connecting trusted research to the adoption of best practices.

Some of this year’s winners, who were nominated and selected by their peers, include:

Employee of the Year: Brad McGinley, Grant County Extension Staff Chair.

State Team Award: Arkansas Future Ag Leaders Tour, a five-day professional development opportunity for undergraduate juniors and seniors pursuing agriculture or ag-related majors.

Innovation Team Award: Crittenden County Farmers Market, a farmers market operated for four months in 2024 by Crittenden County extension agent Morgan Chrestman and Mishanna Lanes.

Read more [here](#).

Set healthy conversational boundaries, spend funds wisely to avoid holiday stress

Though gathering with family and friends is a joyful part of the holiday season, navigating political tension can lead to hurt feelings. Brittney Schrick, extension associate professor and family life specialist, said setting firm boundaries about the topics up for discussion and redirecting conversation to shared interests and neutral subjects are key to maintaining a cheerful atmosphere.

“If you don’t want to talk about politics, then you need to say, ‘I’m not going to talk about that,’” Schrick said. “And if the other person insists, then you need to be willing to leave the conversation. If you can, avoid interactions with people whom you know are going to escalate tension or conflict — even if it’s your grandmother.”

Be assertive, but not mean, and try to change the subject to a shared interest or a more neutral topic, such as looking forward to seeing a mutual friend or relative.

In addition to navigating tricky conversations, many individuals and families face tighter holiday budgets for their gatherings and gift exchanges. For those who plan on traveling to see family and friends, Schrick recommends “making your travel worthwhile.”

When it comes to the big holiday meal or party, hosts can ask guests to share the load by having a potluck.

“Do things that don’t necessarily have to be high cost,” Schrick said. “Especially if you’re feeding a crowd, a potluck is always a good idea. It spreads out the expense across everyone who’s participating, as opposed to the host having to do everything.”

For gift giving, Schrick said people should be willing to pull back on the number of gifts they give and focus instead on quality.

“Generally speaking, most people would appreciate getting a couple of nice gifts rather than getting a ton of things that are less quality,” Schrick said.

Schrick advised starting a new tradition by switching from each person buying gifts for every family member and instead taking a Secret Santa-style approach, where each person draws the name of another and only buys gifts for them. Read more [here](#).



FCS agents host mental health programs

This fall, county FCS agents and state faculty and staff have hosted several mental health programs around the state. Mental Health First Aid programs were held in Crawford County, Van Buren County, and at the Little Rock state office. Janet Perkins, Van Buren County FCS Agent hosted local first responders from Shirley and Damascus. The Crawford County Extension Homemakers hosted interested community members, and more than 50 Department of Agriculture inspectors and more than 40 UADA employees were trained across four sessions at the state office.



Mental Health
FIRST AID

Pike County FCS agent Eva Langley hosted two suicide prevention classes in cooperation with the county health coalition and Dr. Brittney Schrick, extension family life specialist. Participants in Glenwood and Murfreesboro learned how to talk to someone experiencing suicidal thoughts and what mental health resources are available in the county and round the state. Clay County FCS agent Christin Holmes worked with Extension Homemakers members to host a health fair that included information on local resources and a session about recognizing anxiety and depression.

Benton County FCS agent Trudy McManus conducts a mental health program every other week with local EHC members. Mental health program associate Laura Grutz spoke to Cleburne County EHC about anxiety and depression in older adults, and at Jefferson and Lawrence County EHC about farmer stress.

Ouachita County FCS agent Kerron Simpson presented on managing farm stress at the county Cattlemen's Association meeting. Pulaski County FCS agent Alicia Boatwright worked with veterans to teach how to deal with big feelings using the FLIP-IT program, and Shawnee Tichenor, Sebastian County FCS agent, is working with 4-H members to learn mindfulness and stress management using the 4-H Yoga for Kids program. White County FCS agent Katie Cullum works regularly with a local homeless shelter to deliver stress management programs. Although the programs reach different audiences, they were all designed to build skills, reduce stigma surrounding mental health, and increase awareness of the importance of stress management and self-care. Our county FCS agents are invaluable resources to their communities and make a real impact on community perceptions of mental health.

Tips for Keeping New Year's Resolutions

Start by making small changes to your lifestyle towards your goal. The great saying "Rome wasn't built in a day" applies when trying to accomplish your resolutions. Making one change a week is common advice but instead try to make each change a habit and then change something else. Make short term goals to accomplish that will manifest into reaching your yearlong goal.

Write down your resolutions. Hang the resolutions on your fridge or put them somewhere that you will see them each day to remind you what you are working on. Another thing that will help reach your goal, have pictures of your goal visible. Whether it is saving money for a vacation or becoming healthier, reminding yourself of the why will motivate you to stay on track.

Have an accountability partner. Whether it's a spouse, friend, or possibly an online group, find someone with a common goal that will keep you accountable for reaching your goals.

Don't be so hard on yourself. Just because you mess up one time, doesn't mean you should quit striving towards your goal. You don't need to wait until the beginning of a new year, new month, or new week to start working on bettering yourself. Begin right now, where you are, in this moment.

Follow accounts that are going to motivate you. Social media has a major impact on our daily lives. This impact does not have to be negative. They are many great social media accounts that can provide us with information and educate us. The great news is Extension has many accounts to follow. If you are trying to save money, follow Dr. Laura Hendrix on Facebook at [UAEXMoney](#). Want to become healthier? Follow [At Home with UAEX](#) (Instagram, Facebook, Pinterest, Twitter). Is gardening a goal of yours? Follow [The Arkansas Garden Blog](#).



January Birthdays

Kelly Gage - Jan. 1	Steve Culp - Jan. 11	Shirley Cleek - Jan. 18	Nina Coffee - Jan. 25
Betty Harrison - Jan. 3	Scott Stiles - Jan. 11	Martha Ray Sartor - Jan. 18	Jacquelyn McCray - Jan. 26
Doris Thomas - Jan. 5	VeEtta Simmons - Jan. 12	Douglas Petty - Jan. 19	Judy Belle - Jan. 26
Earlene Brecheen - Jan. 6	Beth Phelps - Jan. 12	Jerry Williams - Jan. 20	Allen Davis - Jan. 26
Sammy Lee Cline - Jan. 7	Ricky Thompson - Jan. 14	Becky Bridges - Jan. 21	LaVetta Perkins - Jan. 27
Alva Siler - Jan. 8	Kimberly Wiedower - Jan. 14	Cora Nash - Jan. 22	Shirlye Hopkins - Jan. 28
Mona Norris - Jan. 8	Bill Robertson - Jan. 16	Ramona Gordon - Jan. 23	Margy Cannon - Jan. 28
Keith Martin - Jan. 9	Shirley Bennett - Jan. 17	Donna Rinke - Jan. 23	Gary Huitink - Jan. 29
Terrie Treadway - Jan. 9	Robert Seay - Jan. 17	Laura LaRue - Jan. 24	Rebekah Beene - Jan. 29

Message from the director



It's hard for me to believe that we are already halfway through December, and I am trying to figure out what to say in my last article of the year. Based on my recent conversations around the organization, this year is not going down without a fight. It seems

like meetings, events, and projects are continuing at a rapid clip right up until the last minute this year. That's great, in that it highlights the strong demand for the work that CES is doing. It can sure make for a hectic season, though.

I do what to take this opportunity to recognize a couple of specific events in December that I particularly appreciate. First of all, our organization – and the Division of Agriculture as a whole – was very well represented at the Arkansas Farm Bureau Annual Convention. UADA and Bumpers College shared a sponsorship this year, and this allowed us to snag one of the biggest exhibit spaces on the trade show floor. Carla Due, Ouachita District Director, spent an inordinate amount of time planning and organizing our presence at the meeting, and I think it was a huge success. All of our CES program areas were well-represented, along with the Experiment

Station and Bumpers College. It was a great opportunity for us to highlight the comprehensive land-grant mission of the University. I appreciate all of the agents, specialists, and staff who took time to participate – and there were many of you. I got a lot of great feedback from stakeholders who were really impressed by our contribution to the event.

The second thing I would like to draw attention to in December is not really a singular event but rather a widespread phenomenon within our organization at this time of year. Our 4-H clubs across the state are going the extra mile to serve their communities this Christmas season. Our 4-H youth (with considerable help from our agents and volunteers, of course) are managing food drives for the needy, gathering gifts for foster families, visiting and serving at local nursing homes, and generally giving of themselves and their talents to meet needs in their communities in a special way at Christmastime. Seeing kids experience the joy of giving, not just receiving, is a beautiful thing.

I hope everyone has an opportunity to take a bit of a break and spend some quality time with loved ones over the holiday. I look forward to seeing everyone in the new year. Until then,

Merry Christmas!