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4-Hers focus on leadership, service at National 4-H Congress

Thirty Arkansas 4-H members had much to be grateful for over the Thanksgiving break: the opportunity to attend National 4-H Congress in Atlanta, the premier leadership event for senior 4-H members.

The event, held Nov. 28 - Dec. 2, brought together more than 900 4-H members from across the U.S. and Puerto Rico. Arkansas' delegation included 4-H members, 4-H staff, extension agents, and volunteers from 15 counties.

"Congress provides opportunities for skill development, service learning, and exploring how 4-H works in other states," said Debbie Nistler, head of Arkansas 4-H and Youth Development. "It also provides opportunities to explore careers within their project passions and beyond."

Benton County 4-H member Brooklyn Luedecke said 4-H Congress inspired her to not only better herself as a leader, but also to help others become leaders.

"It was a very meaningful trip because I got to see how much other leaders from across the nation care about 4-H and how they also want to better the program in their communities," said Luedecke, whose main 4-H project is leadership. "My favorite memory from Congress was getting to meet people from other states and find out what things were different while also realizing that many things were the same, because 4-H was our common ground."

The group left the morning after Thanksgiving from Little Rock National Airport and Northwest Arkansas National Airport in Fayetteville. Once in Atlanta, they heard from several keynote speakers, including New York Times best-selling author Dan Clark and John Beede, an Everest mountaineer who shared his success strategies.

"My most enjoyable experience was the talented comedian and juggler who cheers up children at a local hospital in Atlanta," Pulaski County 4-H member Isaiah Breshears, 18, said. "He reminded us that we are loved by our friends, valued by



Thirty Arkansas 4-Hers represented the state at National 4-H Congress in Atlanta.

our clubs, and that suicide is never the answer."

The Arkansas 4-H members also worked on variety of community service projects in the Atlanta metro area — from landscaping Piedmont Park and the Atlanta History Center, to reading to elementary students, to sorting and packing books for Children in Africa, for which Breshears volunteered.

The teens also did some sightseeing in Atlanta with stops at the Atlanta

Zoo, College Football Hall of Fame, World of Coca-Cola, Georgia Aquarium, and Truist Park, home of the Atlanta Braves.

Breshears, who has 4-H projects in Workforce and Career Development and Environmental Science, said his favorite stop was Truist Park.

"We got to visit the press box, dugout, and the field," he said. "I learned a lot about the important role sports management and mass communications play in nationally broadcast sporting events."

All of the Arkansas delegation earned their trip to 4-H Congress by winning advanced record book contests in their respective projects.

"This trip is a culmination of years of work on their projects, building skills, and preparing for life after 4-H," Nistler said. "These are some of the hardest working, strongest young people you'll meet." Read more [here](#).

THE INSIDE STORIES

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Extension offers resources, training to help farmers manage stress

Worsening economic challenges have led to a “mental health crisis among farmers,” said Brittney Schrick, extension associate professor and family life specialist for the University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture.

To help farm families cope, the Cooperative Extension Service is offering training in farm stress management and mental health first aid to equip producers and other members of the agriculture community.

However, there are barriers that keep some from getting the help they need.

“Stress feels like such a normal part of farming that often, people don’t think that they can benefit from learning how to manage it better,” Schrick said. “Then, especially when we get to the point where we are now — in farm crisis mode — they feel like there’s not anything they can do.”

Schrick said that though she and colleagues around the country have offered farm stress programming and similar in-person resources in recent months, they have found attendance that attendance is lacking.

“We know this is a needed topic, but farmers will not come,” Schrick said. “This is why we have to attack this problem from a different angle, with the goal of surrounding the agriculture community with people who are trained to recognize and respond to signs of extreme stress or mental health challenges.”

Schrick said community members can include farm lenders, extension agriculture agents and people who work at farmer co-ops, along with government employees, especially in small and rural areas.

“We want to reach anybody who interacts with and has long-term relationships with people in this industry, providing wrap-around support,” Schrick said.

The Cooperative Extension Service offers a [farm stress management program](#), which is delivered by local county extension agents.

Extension also offers an 8-hour Mental Health First Aid training course, which includes in-depth information about how to respond to someone experiencing a mental health or substance abuse crisis. The course also includes QPR suicide prevention training, which can be modified specifically for farmers and those who work with the population. QPR stands for question, persuade and refer — the three steps anyone can learn to help prevent suicide.

The Division of Agriculture also houses the [Southern Risk Management Education Center](#), one of four centers nationwide whose mission is to educate farmers and ranchers to manage the unique risks of producing food.

In 2025, 12 extension agriculture agents completed the suicide prevention training, along with 14 family and consumer sciences agents and four 4-H agents. At these trainings, Schrick said she has heard first-hand accounts from agents that illustrate how critical the resources are.

“Several agents have told stories in training that I’m just wowed by,” Schrick said. “Equipping agents to go on farm visits helps with their own mental health and their ability to be more vigilant. Going forward, if a farmer says something concerning that they might not have caught in the past, they now have an internal script they can use to follow up.

“These agents have built long-term, one-on-one relationships with these producers, and when an agent notices a change in behavior or notices that they’re talking in new ways, that agent will know how to respond,” Schrick said. Read more [here](#).



Erica Fields of SMREC speaks at "Surviving the cost-price squeeze" in Stuttgart, Arkansas.

UADA winter production meeting calendar available online

At a time when making the most of every cent, minute and acre counts, this year’s winter production meetings will focus on improving a farm’s bottom line and mitigating negative impacts.

The annual winter meetings — focused by commodity and county — will feature extension agronomists and economists from the Division of Agriculture.

The [annual production calendar is available online](#). Many details are still in the works, so attendees should contact their county extension agent for times and locations.

The slate of 23 meetings begins Jan. 8 for Clay and Greene counties and ends March 24 in Mississippi and Crittenden counties. The Jan. 8 meeting is unique as it focuses on ag technology. Read more [here](#).

Hightower to retire after more than two decades with Division of Agriculture

Mary Hightower, chief communications officer for the University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture, will retire from the organization in January 2026 after 23 years of service.

Her two-decade investment in publicizing the work of both the Arkansas Agricultural Experiment Station and the Cooperative Extension Service — the research and education arms of the Division of Agriculture, respectively — was only the latest chapter in a remarkably varied career.

Hightower's inclination toward journalism surfaced early. As an 8-year-old child, she created a neighborhood newspaper describing activities in her New Jersey hometown.

"I just stuffed I don't know how many pages of paper in my dad's typewriter and just banged away and wrote stories about what was going on in the neighborhood," Hightower said.

Hightower completed her bachelor's degree in history in 1985 at Boston College, which included a year at the University College of London, where she studied primary texts in support of her minor, medieval studies. She said it provided a level of academic rigor that went a long way in support of her eventual career path.

After completing her degree, Hightower began working to break into her long-sought journalism career. She was soon hired by a chain of daily suburban newspapers in Texas, owned by the Dallas Morning News. The paper was a training ground for freshly minted reporters.

After 18 months in Texas — the minimum experience required to apply to The Associated Press — Hightower raced to the Dal-

las AP bureau to take the agency's written exam. After a successful interview, she was offered a reporting position with AP's Little Rock bureau.

During her years with the AP, Hightower identified agriculture as one of Arkansas' chief industries and an under-appreciated source of news. Hightower developed a relationship with Lamar James, then a writer with the Cooperative Extension Service's communications department, along with other ag news sources throughout the state.

After a decade of high-pressure, "24/7" deadlines, Hightower sought a change of pace. In 1997, she left the AP, and began working for extension on a part-time basis, writing stories and press releases 30 hours a week, while also working several other gigs to pay the bills.

In 2000, Hightower left extension — and Arkansas — to pursue a career in strategic communications in Florida. While it was a step away from journalism, the experience provided her with another set of tools she would eventually bring back to the Division of Agriculture.

In 2006, an opportunity to return to the Division of Agriculture presented itself, and Hightower accepted a position as assistant

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Deacue Fields, VP-Agriculture for the U of A System Division of Agriculture, left, embraces Mary Hightower, chief Communications officer for the Division of Agriculture, during her retirement ceremony on Dec 1, 2025.

Extension welcomes new beef cattle specialist Ally Grote

University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture has welcomed Ally Grote as its new beef cattle specialist. Grote, who grew up on a cow-calf operation in Missouri and has a Ph.D. in ruminant nutrition from Oklahoma State University, brings extensive research and hands-on experience in animal nutrition. In her new role, she will focus on producer needs, particularly heifer development, providing science-based guidance and educational programs to support beef cattle operations in Arkansas.



Poinsettias in Arkansas: A holiday plant with local roots



The vibrant red, green and white foliage and flowers of the poinsettia plant make it a favorite gift and decoration during the holiday season and beyond.

The festive plant also has a special connection to Arkansas history: the state's Poinsett County and the poinsettia plant both derive their names from Joel Roberts Poinsett, a U.S. Congressman and botanist from South Carolina. Poinsett first brought clippings of the poinsettia plant to the United States from its native Mexico in the early 1800s.

Poinsett served as secretary of war under President Martin Van Buren, and though

he never visited Arkansas, Poinsett was a friend of Arkansas Congressman Archibald Yell.

Read more about year-round poinsettia care [here](#).

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



As I write this, Christmas is fast approaching. I'm not ready for it, but that is nothing new. Seems like there are always a few more gifts to pick up or family arrangements to sort out or holiday travel to plan or Christmas baking to get done. Christmas has been on December 25th since at least the year 336, but it still manages to sneak up on me.

You may have noticed that my to-do list didn't include any work-related items. That is no minor omission. The end of the year is a busy time in Extension, and I know everyone in the system has been working hard to wrap up 2025's many activities. This has been a challenging year in many respects. Programmatically, we had to deal with major natural disasters and significant pest and disease outbreaks, the worst farm financial crisis in a generation, and the elimination of federal funding for SNAP-Ed (our flagship nutrition/health program

for 30 years). Along with all that, shifting federal funding priorities and a contentious budget process (including a record-long government shutdown) created a highly uncertain environment for administrative decision making.



Albert Einstein once said that in the middle of every difficulty lies opportunity. He was right about that – evidently, he was a pretty smart guy. For Extension, the difficult year of 2025 was an opportunity for us to demonstrate that the Cooperative Extension Service is not just relevant but essential. No other organization or agency (state or national) has the capacity, reach, or expertise to respond to immediate stakeholder needs in Arkansas the way Extension did repeatedly in 2025. We fulfilled our mission in a difficult environment. That makes it a great year in my book.

I look forward to see you all next year. Merry Christmas!

Hightower retires, cont.

director of extension communications, working under the then-director of communications, Bob Reynolds. The return marked the beginning of her efforts to transform the department into what it has become today.

In 2014, with Reynolds' retirement, Hightower was hired as the director of extension communications. With no counterpart over the experiment station, she also led a team of writers, photographers and other communicators located in Fayetteville as well.

In 2019, the Division of Agriculture reorganized its communications structure, hiring Hightower as chief communications officer. Tracy Courage was hired as extension communications director and Nick Kordsmeier, then a visual content specialist for the division's Agriculture Experiment Station, was hired as interim research communications director.

Looking back on her career with the Division of Agriculture, Hightower said the thing she was most proud of was the evolution of the division's relationship to local media.

"I think the fact that we are so highly regarded by the media, and it's not just because we're 'convenient,' says a lot about what we've been doing," she said. "It's because we're always responsible. The quality of the work we put out is very well respected."

Although officially retiring, Hightower plans to remain involved with Division of Agriculture communications in a part-time capacity, communicating remotely while, among other things, she sails the seas with her husband of 28 years, John.

"I started sailing when I first met John," Hightower said. "It felt so natural. I don't know what it was, but the movement of wind and water just felt so intuitive. Read more [here](#)."