

Finding Your Spark - A Youth's Perspective for Parents and Youth

I remember the first demonstration I ever gave in 4-H. I showed my club how to make Jell-O Marshmallow Roll Ups. I stood up in front of what seemed like thousands of people, when in reality, it was maybe 30 people, and I shook in fear. I poured hot water into a cherry red jello mix, stirred in melted marshmallows, and rolled up this concoction to cut into slices with string floss. The entire talk lasted maybe 6 minutes but 8-year-old Katrina felt like she was talking forever. However, now after 10 years of growing up learning how to do public speaking in 4-H, I can easily talk in front of any group. This past November I was able to talk on a stage in front of about 300 people at the Kansas Youth Leadership Forum and present at the countywide recognition banquet. 4-H at the club level impacts and changes kids' lives for opportunities beyond their club in 4-H as well as opportunities and confidence outside of 4-H.

“Find Your Spark with 4-H” is this year’s National 4-H Theme. A spark is defined by Google Dictionary as “a small fiery particle thrown off from a fire, alight in ashes, or produced by striking together two hard surfaces such as stone or metal” or “a trace of a specified quality or intense feeling.” A fiery, intense feeling. There is not another organization or activity I am involved in that does not give me a more “fiery” feeling than 4-H. I excitedly told my college speech class all about the 4-H program, all of my teachers are exhausted from hearing me rattle on about the organization, and most of my conversations with friends at some point include me highlighting 4-H. It is no secret that I found a spark FOR 4-H, but through that spark I have also found my spark WITH 4-H.

I joined the countywide meat judging team the spring of my 8th grade year after my parents found out about the team and encouraged me to join. I learned my grandpa had been the collegiate meat judging coach at K-State for many years and then helped coach my mom’s 4-H team as well. Through this 4-H experience, something I would never have had anywhere else, I eventually found my spark. Now the fiery passion did not ignite overnight. I have not grown up on a farm and I had no previous agriculture background, but with the help of my grandpa, I learned all about the animal science industry and fell in love with animal agriculture. Like the first definition says a “fire... produced by striking together two hard surfaces.” I was stubborn to learn this new activity and my grandpa was stubborn to teach me. One thing 4-H has taught me for 10 years is resilience and through this experience of the last 4 years, I found a tangible spark, which is helping lead me to my college career and beyond.

While it is amazing to say that 4-H has inspired me to study animal science and join the K-State meat judging team, that spark is not near as important as the many other sparks I have found with 4-H. I have developed a passion for civic leadership and public speaking through 4-H. 4-H has taught me life skills such as time management, how to properly write an email, effectively communicating with both youth and adults, how to cook, how to wake up early to walk sheep, the list goes on and on. However, how did 4-H help me find this spark, it was due to my willingness to put myself out there and the encouragement of my parents and grandparents.

In the last year, I have experienced so many different opportunities through 4-H. I am an executive board member of the county teen council and I am a National Conference Delegate on

the Kansas 4-H Youth Leadership State Council. I have helped plan the Southeast Region Leadership Forum and state events such as the Kansas Youth Leadership Forum where I was the chairperson for elections. I attended the National 4-H Meat Judging Contest as a member of the inaugural Kansas “Allstar” team. I was trained in civic community conversation to be a group leader at Citizenship in Action. But none of those opportunities were just handed to me.

I have been involved in many different groups and activities such as youth symphonies, sports, and school clubs. But as I started high school, the organization that I found the most joy and purpose in was 4-H. That will not be the same for every kid. Some kids will find their most purpose and joy in theater or softball. They will still want to be involved in their local 4-H club and take projects to the county fair but it will not turn into what they want to devote the bulk of their time to. Regardless of if a kid finds their spark in 4-H or sports, it is then up to both them and their parents to cultivate that fire. Start rubbing those two hard rocks together and success can happen. I have given up a lot of other opportunities for 4-H. My parents originally were the ones to encourage me to try out a teen council hosted event, the annual formal dinner and dance. But past that was when I decided to join Teen Council, and then run for an office position, which has eventually led me to run and be elected to the state council. Our state council advisors preach all the time that the opportunity is only what we make of it. Some examples of how I took that to heart last year was volunteering to create updated trifolds to promote the council at the state fair, running and being elected as KYLF and Southeast region secretary, and being the elections chair.

The title “4-H” itself is not a magic that will just create this immediate spark and have every kid wanting to study animal science in college. But 4-H is the entire organization: the parents/grandparents, agents, project leaders, college mentors, advisors, and the youth itself. 4-H offers so many different projects and opportunities, find what best suits you and take the initiative to find every opportunity related. The title isn’t going to just hand leadership skills to each kid, but through the opportunities leaders are developed. 4-H did not hand me a spark, but WITH 4-H: with the adults and mentors, with my friends I have met through 4-H, with the opportunities I took the initiative to find, I found my spark WITH 4-H.

I have a friend who has found her spark through music. She is in youth symphonies, marching band, takes private lessons, and wants to do music in college. She is also a member of my 4-H Club. 4-H is for all youth. Through 4-H she has found confidence in speaking and performing in front of people at our club and at 4-H Days. She has given demonstrations on how to play the flute and properly sing. She is active in other projects such as the foods project and she even shows lambs. Through those projects she has learned life skills such as cooking and caring for animals. 4-H has also given her relationships with older kids that have mentored her and introduced her to new friendships. She will say 4-H has taught her how to work, ask for help, problem solve, and find opportunities in the areas that she is passionate about. While our 4-H stories are very different, this shows that 4-H is indeed for all youth, and 4-H can be used in so many different capacities to help develop youth to find their spark.

When I was giving my first demonstration I know my parents or myself never thought little shy, timid, terrified Katrina would fall in love with 4-H, join the teen council executive board, or the state youth council. Nobody would have guessed that 4-H would inspire me and help me learn what I love to do and what I don’t love to do. But parents and youth alike: this is

my 4-H story, and this can be your story with 4-H or with something else. But my best advice for everyone in any situation is: find what makes you rub two hard stones together to captivate you, to motivate you, and when you find that grab it, cultivate it, and run with it finding every opportunity you can. Parents: challenge your children with 4-H and push them out of their comfort zone. Help give them the resources to learn the soft skills 4-H teaches that is crucial in any profession. Youth: allow 4-H to challenge you. There are so many benefits to 4-H and it is worth it to be a member. It is not easy, you will have to make sacrifices and take risks, but it is worth it to find your spark.