



4-H: Foundation for future leaders

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Jamie Burrow won the Grand Champion 4-H Citrus Tree prize at the Central Florida Fair in 1998. The real prize was discovering the intersection of her talent and her passion for citrus.

But she didn't think of it as a career. Then she visited with John Jackson — four years after she aged out of 4-H. John, who now runs the Florida Citrus Hall of Fame, was then a University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS) Extension citrus agent.

Jackson suggested Burrow pursue a citrus degree. “You can do that?” she replied. Then she did that. She's now an Extension program manager at the UF/IFAS Citrus Research and Education Center.

Burrow also volunteers running the citrus project at the Osceola County Fair, a job she desired to continue when her dad, Jim Yates, passed away 11 years ago. Burrow's own 4-H project 20 years ago proved a gateway into a career in science, yes, but also into life-long community service.

INVESTING IN YOUTH

UF/IFAS has built an unparalleled citrus-related research and Extension operation so there's a citrus industry for future Jamie Burrows. It spends comparatively little assuring that there will be citrus professionals to populate that industry. We need a greater investment in our youth.

I have asked my people to think big. Michael Gutter, the UF/IFAS state program leader for 4-H, hasn't

disappointed. He makes a bold call for taking us from a current enrollment of about 200,000 and growing it to 300,000 within a decade.

I hope the Florida Legislature agrees and incorporates the UF/IFAS budget proposal for 4-H funding into its pending plan. It would set us on a course to give 100,000 more kids a shot at discovering what Burrow discovered.

I can't think of a better way to inculcate in Generation Z an appreciation for agriculture. Most importantly, whatever field these kids choose, participation in 4-H makes it more likely that they'll be a leader in it.

In 4-H, they sell citrus trees to real growers at auction, and they reflect on the challenges and joys of the experience. Ashlinn McCullah, then 11 years old, wrote to longtime citrus project supporter Mickey Page shortly before his death two years ago, “Some problems I have had, though, is our goats ate some of our trees. Thank goodness we had three extra trees! We also had lots of leaf miners. Those were not fun.”

Ultimately, though, Ashlinn wrote, she was in her fourth year of the project because it was so much fun, and, “My favorite thing I did this year was meeting new friends and seeing my friends get awesome prizes for their hard work.”

PARTICIPATION IS PARAMOUNT

Our push to expand 4-H requires funding. This is about more than money, though. A budget signals

Jamie Burrow (center) recognizes Brett Hunt (left), Reserve Grand Champion Citrus Tree winner, and Alicia Bronson (right), Grand Champion Citrus Tree winner, at the Osceola County Fair Citrus Tree Show.

priorities. Kids get this on a basic level. They either know people like 4-H agents and volunteers, or they wonder where the adults are. Too many of our youth are in that wondering category.

The budget determines what story we can tell kids about their future. In the case of citrus, it's a story that acknowledges the current challenges and presents the opportunities for the next generation to participate in solutions.

We need agents to recruit and vet volunteer club leaders, to develop curriculum and to organize events like public speaking contests and showing animals at the county fair.

You get it. John Jackson gets it and has even established an endowment for citrus project participant scholarships. Phil Rucks and Ryan Atwood, who buy trees most years at the 4-H auction, get it.

I'll continue to try to get policymakers in Tallahassee to get it. I hope you'll help. Tell people how much 4-H means to you, your family and your industry. 🍊

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