



## UW-Extension and VISTA: working side by side to empower those in need

**"It ended up being my favorite job. I found myself excited to go to work. Once I got to know all the kids, it was just so rewarding for me."** – *Jean Davis, former Iron County VISTA, now a senior at the University of Minnesota*

**"I think 4-H is fantastic. The whole 4-H philosophy – leadership, working with families, trust building, building life skills, working with communities – is just tremendous."** – *Jan Nowlen, retired schoolteacher and Richland County VISTA*

**"The kids loved it. They really liked the challenge. Going for a 15-mile bike ride was a big deal for them."**  
– *Carolyn Andresen, former Iron County VISTA, now a junior at UW-Eau Claire*

### Situation

UW-Extension sometimes lacks the resources to run much-needed programs for the high percentage of low-income families among its clientele. The recession of the past few years has created hardship throughout the state, resulting in greater need for programs that empower youth and families.

### Response

UW-Extension and AmeriCorps VISTA became partners, with counties applying for VISTA members through an annual grant process.

"There was a logical connection between the two programs," says Linda Sunde, Wisconsin director of the Corporation for National and Community Service, the umbrella organization of VISTA.

VISTA stands for Volunteers in Service to America and is the domestic equivalent of the Peace Corps. Volunteers, who must be 18 or older, serve eight-week summer terms or one-year terms. VISTA members receive a living allowance plus an educational stipend they can apply to student loans or tuition.

The partnership started in 2003, with a handful of VISTA members serving in a few counties, and has grown to include every UW-Extension district in the state. This year, 18 counties had 24 summer VISTA members, and 20 counties have 25 year-round VISTA members. Seven are funded through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, or "stimulus" dollars.

Sunde points out that VISTA members do not act in a staff, or support, role. "Their work is developmental," she says, "expanding programs to unserved communities rather than running programs as any other staff person would."

Overall, the goal of the UW-Extension-VISTA partnership is sustainability – mobilizing individuals, building partnerships, developing programs that empower youth and adults, then stepping aside and letting residents take over and lead the way.

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"It's not direct service," Sunde emphasizes. "They're not planting a garden for people, not staffing a food bank, or even teaching children in a classroom. They're recruiting volunteers, developing curriculum, building the capacity of people to do it themselves."

## Outcomes

New ways of doing things

- The UW-Extension-VISTA partnership allows UW-Extension to strengthen existing youth and family programs and create new ones.

Having VISTA members "offers us a huge way to extend our programs to an audience that really needs it," says Sue Curtis, UW-Extension's VISTA coordinator and the state's 4-H military liaison. "Every Extension educator wears 15 hats. An extra set of hands makes an enormous difference in terms of offering programs."

A survey Curtis conducted shows that VISTA members, like Extension educators, wear many hats: They write program curricula, recruit and train volunteers, plan and conduct meetings, build partnerships, create web sites, serve as technology advisors, apply for grants, create promotional materials, and develop leadership skills in youth.

They apply these skills to after-school programs, neighborhood centers, community gardens, nutrition and budgeting initiatives, and summer camps, to name a few. In every endeavor, Curtis says, they incorporate core 4-H values, such as youth development, problem solving, communication and STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) skills.

In addition to hands-on help, they bring energy, enthusiasm and creativity to UW-Extension programs.

"When you're here this long, you kind of get stagnant," says Pam Hobson, a Richland County 4-H youth development agent for 22 years. "This is a good way to bring in new ideas, new ways of looking at things and new ways of doing things."

The following stories represent a sample of UW-Extension-VISTA partnerships around the state.



*Retired teacher Jan Nowlen has used her educational expertise to develop four after-school programs during her tenure as a Richland County VISTA. She's in the process of working her way out of a job by training volunteers to carry on the programs. At right, some of Richland County's after-school students display the results of "Biofuel Blast," a 4-H experiment exploring alternative fuels.*

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## Watching others grow

- VISTA members have breathed new life into Richland County youth programs and started new ones, says Richland County 4-H youth development agent Pam Hobson. One VISTA used her involvement in two summer youth enrichment programs based at UW-Richland to promote 4-H and recruit new members.

Another Richland County VISTA, retired schoolteacher Jan Nowlen, has applied her education skills to starting after-school programs.

In 2008 Nowlen helped start, coordinate and develop classes for a twice-monthly after-school program for up to 125 students ranging in age from 6 to 18. Word spread and before long another school district tapped her expertise for a "delayed-start" morning program for 60-plus students.

In the spirit of sustainability, Nowlen has spent the past year recruiting and training parents, grandparents, high school students and others to carry on the successful after-school programs.

The former elementary teacher says it's a thrill watching high school students teach science and technology skills, such as speed-cup stacking and ski-ramp building, to youngsters.

"That's what our job should be," she says, "as a facilitator. Provide the opportunity for somebody else to do it, and sit back and watch them grow."

Working as a VISTA gives Nowlen a chance to spread the 4-H philosophy she loves. "That whole idea of learning by doing is the way that I like to teach."

In Richland County, the VISTA partnership has enabled Extension to cast a wide net and grow its 4-H program. Without Nowlen, notes Hobson, "we wouldn't be doing any after-school programs."

As it is, after-school programs are booming in Richland County. Nowlen recently got the go-ahead to start two new 4-H after-school programs at Richland Center grade schools.



*Former Iron County VISTA Carolyn Andresen (in yellow) rests with her group of middle-school TrailBlazers after hiking to Foster Falls on the Potato River.*

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## Lifestyle changes

- In Iron County, the VISTA partnership has made a big difference in the stability and variety of UW-Extension programs. "It's gone way beyond my expectations," says Gloria Fauerbach, Iron County youth development agent.

Thanks to a VISTA, Hurley, the county seat, has a thriving 4-H after-school program. VISTA members also help run two summer youth programs, 4-H LEAF and 4-H TrailBlazers. Both emphasize healthy lifestyle choices, including exercise and nutrition based on USDA's "MyPyramid."

"At first the kids brought energy drinks and chips for snacks," says Carolyn Andresen, a VISTA who led 32 middle-school TrailBlazers in weekly bicycling, hiking and canoeing adventures. "By the end, they'd bring carrots and water, and they'd be so proud. It was really rewarding to see the healthy lifestyle change they went through."

Over the course of five weeks and 1,500 miles, students learned about leadership, the environment, bicycle and water safety, geocaching and GPS technology, and the rewards of physical activity.

Now a junior majoring in elementary education and special education at UW-Eau Claire, Andresen says the experience affirmed her decision to become a teacher.

"I learned so much about how to be a respectful and good leader, and be a good role model with children that age," she says.

Iron County's youth development agent reports that the TrailBlazers met recently to plan new adventures.

"Two of the parents talked at length to me about how much they value the TrailBlazer program for their child," says Fauerbach. "So there is certainly a carry-over from the eight weeks or year these VISTAs serve in our communities."



*Promoting physical activity, former Iron County VISTA Jean Davis teaches dance steps to 4-H members.*

## Personal growth

- Physical activity – in the form of dance and creative games – was also a key ingredient in Iron County's 4-H LEAF (leadership, experience, adventure and friendship), where kids learned that running and organized sports aren't the only ways to exercise.

VISTA Jean Davis led by example, showing youngsters how to use their imaginations to create new games.

"Whoever you have to play with, or whatever you have to work with, you can find some

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way to be physically active," she says.

Davis says her greatest accomplishment as a VISTA was showing Iron County youth "the impact they can make on their own health."

Because of that experience, she made a career decision to seek a master's degree in physical education after completing her degree in kinesiology at the University of Minnesota.

"I realized what a big impact that I can have, and it makes me want to take everything I know and make sure these kids make the best life they can have."



*Former VISTA Stephanie Sutton (center) received the 2009 Governor's Service Award for outstanding leadership and service, in part for helping start a new juvenile-diversion program in Waukesha County. By her side is Waukesha County UW-Extension director Marcia Jante (left) and Karen Cooper, office services coordinator for Waukesha County UW-Extension.*

## New careers

- Serving as a VISTA jump-started a career for Stephanie Sutton, now a program coordinator for 180° Juvenile Diversion in Waukesha County.

As VISTA members, Sutton and Gabe Gardner, now a graduate student in library science, developed a model for the Waukesha County diversion program based on "best practices" of diversion efforts around the country. The pair researched and wrote a 55-page report on their findings, sought input from UW-Extension specialists Dr. Stephen Small and Mary Huser, then presented their plan to the Waukesha County executive, district attorney and sheriff's office.

"They authorized the program and said, 'Let's give it a try,' " says Marcia Jante, director of the Waukesha County UW-Extension office.

Gardner applied for several grants, winning \$10,000 to start the new initiative. In its first year, the program has developed a 15-member advisory board and an eight-member board of directors, and has potential grants in the pipeline. The first class of seven young adults recently graduated from the new program.

Jante explains that Waukesha County puts a lot of effort into hiring VISTAs whose interests mirror the needs of the office and community.

"The key is to know what your community needs are and then reflect that in a good position description," says the county director, who has interviewed as many as 50 applicants to find the best match.

Once hired, VISTA members receive the guidance of a formal mentoring team of Extension educators, professional development opportunities and quarterly meetings with Jante.

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"I want to make sure they have a great personal and professional development experience," she says.

All the effort pays off in new and better programs for the county.

As Jante says, "We never would have been able to develop the diversion program if it wasn't for our VISTAs, Gabe and Stephanie."

Other outcomes of the UW-Extension-VISTA partnership include:

#### New leadership

- County UW-Extension offices serve as training grounds for VISTA members who may someday assume leadership roles within UW-Extension, the nonprofit sector and other fields that embrace the ethic of community service.

#### A legacy of stronger communities

- In working with UW-Extension, VISTA members contribute to a many-layered foundation that leaves behind stronger communities, says Linda Sunde, the state's VISTA liaison. In the long run, she says, it's all about, "How many programs were strengthened? How many kids did we help? How many adult volunteers did we involve? That legacy, to me, is what the VISTAs leave behind."

#### Inspiring role models

- VISTA gives young people role models. Youth who meet VISTA members like Jan Nowlen, Jean Davis and Carolyn Andresen may one day follow in their footsteps and become VISTAs themselves. They may think, "I'd like to do that," says Linda Sunde. "The VISTAs made an impression and an impact in the community that I hope will be felt for awhile, and the young people they've come in contact with will remember them and be inspired by them."

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