Today on across the fence a group of four H teenagers who are learning about citizenship and while raising public awareness about environmental issues. Good afternoon and thanks for joining us I'm Judy Simpson. The four age program is all about providing positive opportunities for young people that promote life skills. Citizenship and advocacy are two of lifelong skills that are being promoted by the Vermont four H youth environmental council. With me to begin the program is four H educator Lauren Traister Lauren is based in Lamoille county she leads the youth environmental council in her statewide role as coordinator for the four H team and leadership program. It's nice to have you back. Let's start off by talking about what is the four H youth environmental council?

Lauren.: As you alluded to in the open the four H youth environmental council focuses on environmental issues but it's primarily a teen leadership opportunity. It's actually a really unique where the youth get to choose their own environmental issue. They come together in the fall and decide what issue they want to tackle for the year. They research they write a position paper they go to the statehouse they lobby our Vermont legislators. Sometimes I'll testify in committee. A really learn what citizen activism is. What's unique about Vermont that they learn is how accessible our state houses and how excess a below our representatives are. In the process of this whole program what we're really getting is life skills that they're going to take with them for the rest of their lives. Public speaking and citizenship advocacy how to research a topic have to use their voice to get change made in the state that they live in. So does a lot that goes into this program.

Judy.: Why the emphasis on the environment?

Lauren.: Two reasons. This program was actually modeled on a program that came out of Michigan. Their program was a conservation program. It was brought to our attention by one of their alumni who was at the Vermont law school. She wrote a grant application to bring the program here. She wanted to replicate it and then she got in touch with us to bring it in house with Vermont four H. The program itself was an environmental program why we kept it strictly as an environmental program was because that's my background
and I have a lot of schooling in environment and natural resources. So I also had a personal interest in that as well.

Judy.: Recently across the fence is Keith Silva was with the for each youth environmental council as the teenagers reached out to the public.

It takes more than a little rain to dampen the spirits of 4-Hers ... especially when they’re trying to raise the public’s awareness about an important issue.

Nat. Snd.: “Would you like a pamphlet about safe cosmetics? Cool!”

These young women are members of the 4-H Youth Environmental Council. They’re on Church Street in Burlington to educate the public about the hidden dangers in cosmetics and cleaning products.

Kayla Ray/4-H Youth Environmental Council: “I guess we’re hoping that the public will become more aware of the type of toxins and chemical products that are in things that we put on our body every day. Not only lipstick and other cosmetics, but body wash, shampoo, conditioner just you look at the ingredients list and it looks like the ingredients of a chemistry lab.”

Nat. Snd.: “When it says natural on a product there’s absolutely no regulation for that. Really?”

Dan Bradley/Burlington, VT: “There were things that I hadn’t heard before which was always good. You use this stuff every day you use half a dozen of these kinds of things every day, this stuff builds up and that was something you don’t really think about, you think about that one time use and that was a point that stuck with me.

Terra Nicholson/Burlington, VT: “They said look at the ingredients instead of just going by the label saying natural because fragrance can include things that are that are toxic which is something I did not know.”

The 4-H Youth Environmental Council is member-driven. It’s a chance for teenagers to focus their energy on a topic that interests them and also has an impact on their communities.
Lauren Traister/UVM Extension 4-H Educator: “This particular program is geared towards teens specifically teens who are interested in learning about citizenship, how to engage in your community and specifically around an environmental issue.”

Sierra Frisbee/4-H Youth Environmental Council: “I find 4-H to be really empowering. For me, as a young person, you know, but also a young woman and it helps me find ways to channel like the activism that I want to be involved with. We’ve come up with all these ideas of, you know, what topic we wanted to study so it’s all really self-piloted, it isn’t somebody else telling us what to do, this is what we’re going to do now. This matters to us. Let’s do this. This seems like a good idea. All like really student based so that’s what I like about it.”

Traister: “As young women who use products on a daily basis they were horrified about what they were putting into their bodies that they didn’t know they were putting into their bodies so they actually became quite the advocates on this issue and I believe some of them are going to continue throughout their life advocating until change is made. 6:02

Ray: “I feel like definitely one of the biggest things I’ve gained from this whole experience is making connections with the community. A big part of 4-H is learning how to be a better citizen and it teaches citizenship and I think that going out into the community and making these connections and educating the community is a great way to better yourself and be a better citizen.”

The group’s activism and citizenship came together earlier in the year when they presented their findings to Vermont legislators at the statehouse in Montpelier.

Mallory Hillman/4-H Youth Environmental Council: “We’ve done a lot going and presenting to legislature and everything like that and I never thought that we could like get that high up on the scale and we actually can and we can make a difference if we try.”

Ray: “Honestly, I have to say I’m not one for politics and like getting involved in the government, but when it’s related to a good cause it really feels great to go to the statehouse and to present and have people actually care about you, send you emails later thanking me for the presentation and it’s a great feeling.

Each of these young women has a personal stake in raising public awareness about this issue.

Ray: “There’s a lot of peer pressure of there to try to look best. My mom always tells me like wear eye shadow and stuff because it will make your eyes look bigger, you have such pretty eyes you should bring them out and it’s like if I have such pretty eyes why can’t I just like kind of show them the way they are.”
Hillman: “I’m a pretty low-key like female. Like I don’t use too much makeup or anything like that, but even like my shampoo, my toothpaste, all that like deodorant I use those on the daily and at first it doesn’t seem like there’s too much chemicals in that people probably know it’s not good for you, but when you’re using it every day like each day it really adds up to a lot.”

Frisbee: “You learn how to get support from other people. You learn how to talk to adults. How to talk to businesses. And you learn pretty much a lot of skills that will apply. Hopefully to me, specifically in the future in regards to environmental activism because that’s what I want to go into in college, but just good life skills, people skills, in general. We make some really cool things happen in pretty short amounts of time.

For these young women … the 4-H Environmental Council is about engaging with the public, raising awareness, and a group where ‘cool things happen’. In Burlington, I’m Keith Silva with Across the Fence.

Thanks Keith. Back here in the studio I’m with UVM extension four H educator Lauren Traister and also joining us is one of the teenagers on the four H youth environmental council. I want to welcome 16 year old Rachel Dunphy who is from Shelburne. It's great to have you with us. Why did you get involved with the four H youth environmental council?

Rachel.: I'm on the environmental club at my high school CVU and I was actually approached by a member of the council Sierra Frisbee. I'm always looking for more opportunities to get involved I love to help the environment in whatever way possible in hearing about another way to do that was really exciting.

Judy.: What did you learn from your experience.

Rachel.: I definitely learned a lot about the kinds of things that they can put in cosmetics and I also learned a lot about activism and being able to really stand up and tried to change something. I came into the program halfway through so I didn't get the full experience but I'm continuing the program the next year and I hope to work all the way through it.

Judy.: What about your experience in Burlington we sought in that tape you're out on Church Street talking to people. Was that hard to do? I think it would be hard to walk up to people and tried to explain a topic.

Rachel.: It was definitely difficult to approach people and try to get them to care. We did get a lot of support people were coming and talking to us but it was definitely a learning experience to figure out how to grab their attention and how to keep them interested. I
think in general it's just as long as you get them there and get them even slightly aware of the issue it's a victory.

Judy.: And how about going to the statehouse?

Rachel.: I actually wasn't able to go to the statehouse I had a conflict.

Judy.: Too bad. Lauren this topic about toxins in cosmetics seems to be a perfect fit for at least the young women we saw in the video that a very passionate about it.

Lauren.: It was. As I mentioned earlier they go through a selection process to decide what issue they want to tackle for the year. They come with all sorts of ideas they throw them out and talk about what the issues is and some of the criteria are is this an issue that's in the Vermont legislature at the moment. Can they really affect change and they have a voice? Is this an issue they can make classmates aware of where the general public? It's not just is this an issue that's good is a timely or other things they can tag onto. When the issue of cosmetics came up we did realize there was Federal legislation as well as VPIRG was introducing state legislation so they were actually able to get the full advocacy experience by partnering with other organizations having an opportunity to work at the statehouse and lobby on a bill that was being introduced in that session. It really aside from being a great topic for women it was just a great topic for the whole experience.

Judy.: So your expectation that these kids will stay active on this topic or are you expecting them to move on to other environmental issues?

Lauren.: Every year they pick a new topic but as we have kids that continue from one year to the next it will be up to them how much they want to stay on the last year's topic as a group or some of them will stay on because there personally motivated as the song video. Once you become aware of this issue of toxins as cosmetics it's hard to turn your back tortes it after one year. You want to make sure that legislation gets passed. I feel quite confident that most of these young ladies will be advocating for this until there is legislation.

Judy.: It's really in the way to enhance the four H experience the traditional four H experience that some of the younger kids have and follow them through high school.

Lauren.: It is we're trying to keep kids in four H throughout their whole developmental process. We take is from 5 to 19. As they enter their teenage years we do begin to lose them. Some because they're so busy it's hard for them to commit to the traditional club model. And we need to find things that are more interesting and engaging for them. This program we meet once a month usually on a Sunday afternoon which is what their availability is so I make myself available on a Sunday afternoon but it allows them to have a unique engaging educational experience that does develop not only their skill set in subject matter but it also continues that developmental process of their life skills. We
really do try to find lots of ways to connect and engage with kids throughout their whole developmental process.

Judy.: We notice and this particular project it's girls but boys involved as well?

Lauren.: Boys are invited. Four H does not discriminate boys and girls must actually be included in all our stuff but whether not they sign up as a different thing. This is only year two of this program and we are trying to grow it. This year we grew the program by doubling the number of kids. Think we have four the first year and eight this year but as we learned from Rachel what we're finding is its word of mouth between friends and classmates so the majority of our council members came from CVU this year with one member being from Essex high school. This is supposed to be a statewide program we are really trying to tap into kids all over the state boys and girls. So far we have not found any boys who want to participate and it's a shame they are really missing out on a wonderful opportunity.

Judy.: Rachel we have a minute left. What was probably the most important thing you learn through this experience?

Rachel.: I definitely learned a lot about using safe cosmetics and being educated about the topic. In general I think that I really learned what it is to research something in depth. We had to do a lot of digging to find this information because it's so well hidden and part of the reason it's so well hidden is because it's really something that people are more aware of or should be more aware of and they're not.

Judy.: Lauren if someone's interested in the council what should they do?

Lauren.: They should contact me Lauren Traister through our 800 number and they can get directed to me. Our 800 is (800)-571-0668 you can also go online and find is at UVM.edu/extension click on four H and you can find the youth environmental council pages. We are looking for more members we're starting again this September so we'd love to see more people come out and help us do another great year of advocacy.

Judy.: Excellent thanks for joining us today. That's our program for today I'm Judy Simpson we will see you again next time on across the fence.

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