

Alabama 4-H Youth Attend 4-H National Conference

U.S. Agriculture Secretary Challenges 4-H Youth to Commit to Public Service, Reach Out to At-Risk Peers

Five Alabama 4-H'ers were part of a national delegation of more than 400 youth attending National 4-H Conference, where they heard U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack challenge them to commit to public service and reach out to at-risk peers.

Alabama 4-H'ers Abigail Gibbs of Andalusia; David Kinstley of Birmingham; Erin O'Mary of Brilliant; Ellen Rankins of Cusseta; and Chandler Mulvaney of Opelika were selected to attend the conference at the National 4-H Center in Chevy Chase, Md. Marian Beck, Alabama Cooperative Extension System regional agent in Colbert, Lauderdale and Limestone counties, was the trip's chaperone.

National 4-H Conference is the U.S. Department of Agriculture's premier youth development opportunity to engage youth from across America in creating recommendations for the National 4-H Youth Development Program. A working conference, the delegates will produce recommendations to guide the future of the National 4-H Youth Development Program.

Youth and adults from 47 states and territories, as well a delegation from Canada, took part in an event that has happened in the Washington area since the 1920s, when 4-H'ers slept in tents on the Washington Mall in front of the USDA headquarters. USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture, or NIFA, is the parent organization to 4-H.

Vilsack shared his personal story about when he answered the call to public service. His experience volunteering to raise money to build an athletic complex in his small Iowa town influenced his decision to join the city council and led to his eventual election as mayor, Iowa state senator, Iowa governor and, eventually, to his appointment as U.S. Secretary of Agriculture.

The secretary asked the 4-H'ers to use the 4-H pledge of head, heart, hands and health to help guide them to success. The heart, said Vilsack, represents a commitment to the voice of youth, and he encouraged kids to hold a youth roundtable about issues that are important to them and their communities.



Alabama 4-H delegation members meet with Sen. Richard Shelby, center, during Capitol Hill Day. From left: Erin O'Mary, Ellen Rankins, Abigail Gibbs, Chandler Mulvaney, David Kinstley and Marian Beck.

Vilsack and Education Secretary Arne Duncan spoke to 4-H'ers about community service, valuing education, and embracing positive health and nutrition habits. "I couldn't be more hopeful, more optimistic about your generation," Duncan said.

During the conference, 4-H'ers prepared and delivered presentations on several issues affecting youth, including bullying, environmental conservation and programs for older youth.



U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack

Erin O'Mary, a senior at Brilliant High School in Marion County, said, "Having the opportunity to see Secretary of Agriculture Vilsack and Secretary of Education Duncan in person was outstanding.

"Being able to work with the U.S. Public Service Commissioned Corps to help share ideas on bullying in America was an honor," O'Mary said. "They showed us a program for middle school students ages 9-13. "We decided that another program needed to be created for high school students because we felt that high school is where the main problem with bullying occurs."

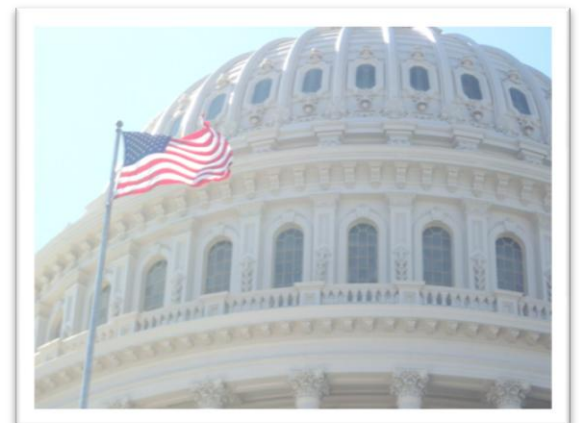
Kinstley, a senior at Briarwood Christian School, said attending National 4-H Conference "made me realize how powerful and impactful I can be in Alabama 4-H.

"I realized that I can change and make a difference in Alabama 4-H and get the support I need behind me if I believe I can do it. I was able to see how I can make an impact on my state's 4-H program, and by doing so I am not only bettering the youth of Alabama 4-H, but also the future leaders of our country."

Gibbs, who visited Washington D.C. for the first time, said the experience "made me a better, more passionate person. It showed me how to channel my passions and interests to a goal and to get something accomplished.

"It was so inspiring seeing the Capitol, to see people that we elected doing their job," Gibbs added.

The Andalusia resident said the workshop she participated in was older youth, and they recommended programs that resemble collegiate 4-H group, allowing older youth a stronger voice. "I learned that I am more outgoing than I thought and that I might have a real future in public speaking."



Rankins, a home-schooled teen from Cusseta, said she worked on a team creating a recommendation on distracted driving, an issue faced by most teenagers. “It was rewarding to be able to come together as a group and use our different backgrounds to come up with a solution.

“I learned that I can put myself in someone else’s shoes and see an issue from another point of view and that made me rethink issues,” Rankins said. “It gave me more confidence in sharing my thoughts and opinions with new people.”

4-H is the nation’s largest youth development organization and a program of our nation’s Cooperative Extension System. In Alabama, Extension is headquartered at Alabama A&M University and Auburn University.



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