

Welcome to New Specialist Joshua Kirby, Ph.D. Ohio 4-H State Specialist of Older Youth and Camping!



Starting on February 1, Dr. Kirby has provided leadership and direction for statewide teen programming for Ohio 4-H. Teen Connections had a chance to talk with Dr. Kirby and find out a bit more about him.

Dr. Kirby, please tell us a little about yourself.

First and foremost, hello to everyone—I'm happy to be in Ohio. I was born and raised on a fruit, grain, and vegetable farm in the Lake (Ontario) Plains region of western New York State (between Rochester and Buffalo). I still enjoy working outdoors, and my new role allows me to combine my interests in the outdoors, research, and supporting and advising youth programs.

Were you involved in 4-H as a youth, and if so, what projects were you involved in?

I was not involved in 4-H as a youth because at the time the 4-H programs in my home county were not well established. My outdoor interests grew from the adventures I had as a Boy Scout and as a summer camp staff member for 5 straight summers. My specialty was campcraft (think ropes, knots, lashing, woods tools, forestry, backpacking, etc.), and I still volunteer to train teens in those topic areas. Most recently I've been involved with camp staff training, and I am a Master Educator with the Leave No Trace Center for Outdoor Ethics.

Any favorite memories of camp?

Yes, many, but only some of them are fit to print! My camp nickname was "Cowboy," and my claim to fame in my home camp were the campfire songs and skits I led or acted in. But the most meaningful memories have come from the friendships that I made while at camp. I have been a groomsman in the weddings of three of my fellow camp staff alumni, and one of those alumni was able to also be in my wedding. We all now live in different parts of the country, and I visit or talk to each of those men about twice per year, but the conversation always continues from where we left off.

What were you doing before coming to Ohio 4-H?

I coordinated the development of two fully online master's degree programs for my alma mater, Penn State University. I was the lone "education guy" in a department full of engineers, which led to a number of discussions about how (today's) young people learn. Sometimes I had to remind the faculty members that assigning 500-page textbooks to read

in one week was not an ideal method for helping their students learn. However, the job that changed my career interests (ultimately bringing me to OSU) was my role at Penn State's Shaver's Creek Environmental Center as the Youth Leadership Development Coordinator. The programs that I developed and delivered while there felt like a natural fit for my academic, professional, and personal experiences, and I promptly changed my doctoral coursework and research to match my interests.

What interested you in the state specialist position?

The state specialist position offers me the perfect combination of responsibilities related to my interests. I can work with teens themselves along with the staff and volunteers connected to a variety of youth programs and 4-H projects. I can research and develop outdoor and camp-based educational programs with Ohio 4-H camps. And I will have the opportunity to work for a world class university and one of the top extensions in the USA. Today, and every day, I feel very fortunate for this opportunity--but let me also say that I studied and worked hard to get here.

Among the many responsibilities you'll have, what are a couple of the goals that you are most excited about?

I don't yet have any official plans that have been approved by all of the proper people, but I've been brainstorming some ideas that I'm willing to share. I have some interest in reviewing the state's 4-H Leadership Camp program, especially by talking with recent youth staff members and advisors. I am also wondering whether a second leadership camp week should be added, but not for 4-H members--I think that there are other youth who would benefit from the 4-H style of leadership training, and 4-H and our 4-H teens could show some leadership of their own by reaching out to new audiences. I also hope to explore or expand some new projects and programs related to Leave No Trace Outdoor Ethics, shooting sports, and civic engagement. And in the interest of recognizing the application of 4-H ideals by our teen members and for developing better relationships with other youth development organizations, I'm toying with the idea of offering a state 4-H commendation to active 4-H members who earn top-level awards outside of 4-H (such as Eagle Scout [BSA], Gold Award [GSUSA], Silver Award [Venturing], first-team all-state athletes, graduating class valedictorian, etc.).

Do you have any ideas on how to make camp available for the already over-scheduled teen population?

A number of youth organizations that have camp programs are asking the same question nowadays, and there may be no easy answers--but there can be some answers. For example, if the staff members and camp administrators are willing, camp programs could be expanded to 6-7 day program but teens could be given the option to attend the first half, second half, or the full week of camp. We also may want to consider the choice of camp locations, as well as the transportation logistics for getting teens to and from camps. The question really comes down to each teen's priorities, and we may want to ask ourselves how we could improve our programs so that teens will give 4-H camp a higher priority in

their personal schedules for 4-7 days each summer. These may be difficult questions to address, but we shouldn't be afraid to address them. I am definitely open to suggestions from teens about this topic--I've heard lots of thoughts from "former teens", but today's teens are our biggest asset for improving our programs.

Could you briefly describe your philosophy in working with older youth?

As a volunteer, a professional, and as a former teen myself, I have learned a few skills in the past 15-or-so years that I believe are effective when advising young adults. First and foremost, I bounce among a few different roles as an advisor: sometimes I'm a stand-on-the-side cheerleader, sometimes I'm an in-the-thick-of-it-with-you partner, sometimes I'm a listen-and-guide counselor, and very rarely I need to be the serious-and-stern-but-fair enforcer. Although I willingly accept the responsibility of being an advisor when I get to work with youth on projects and programs, and that usually means keeping tabs on things like facilities and financials, I really would rather be having fun. The more that my advisees are willing to take charge, demonstrate solid leadership and judgment, and be positive role models for others, the more fun that I get to have. However, I fully recognize and assume responsibility for preparing the older youth I work with to become superior in all aspects of their lives, and if they are able to choose to trust me, I believe I can help each and all of them do amazing things. I'm proud of my track record.

Is there anything else you'd like the Ohio 4-H teens and volunteers to know about you?

I am always on the lookout for stellar teens who want to have an impact on Ohio 4-H, and I hope to meet and be introduced to some of the best teen leaders we have. I believe that statewide impact comes from dedicated and skillful leadership within local clubs and counties, and for the few who hope to broaden their 4-H leadership experience beyond their local areas, I would be looking for dedication, reliability, resourcefulness, and a willingness to use state-level experience to develop and enhance their fellow 4-H members back home. Ohio 4-H has strong traditions of leadership excellence, and our teen leaders are a large part of our success, so I hope that many of our teen members will strive to have a part in shaping the future of the program.

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www.ohio4h.org/teenconnections/