



more than
one million



In its 35-year history, the Georgia 4-H Environmental Education program has reached more than 1 million students with its science-based field study programs and set the standard for similar programs nationwide.

While Georgia 4-H may be best known for youth development programs offered through UGA Extension's 4-H clubs, the organization has offered environmental education to young people across the Southeast since 1979.

Last October, the Environmental Education program's staff, administrators and founder, Diane Davies, celebrated the millionth student to attend classes through the esteemed program.



4-H CULTIVATES ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION

Story by Josh Paine | Photos by John Amis

With more than 44,000 public, private and home-school students attending courses annually, the program has inspired an entire generation of youth through classes that draw on Georgia's unique ecosystems to teach lessons in biology, environmental science and ecology.

"Too many children have not been afforded the chance to experience nature," said Arch Smith, Georgia 4-H state leader. "The 4-H Environmental Education program provides hands-on learning in the natural environment at our five 4-H centers, from the mountains to the Piedmont to the sea."

The professional staff at the five centers (Rock Eagle in Eatonton,

Wahsega in Dahlonge, Fortson in Hampton, Burton on Tybee Island and Jekyll on Jekyll Island) hire and train college graduates as seasonal instructors to deliver a research-based curriculum linked directly to the Georgia Performance Standards.

"Teachers and parents recognize the program for bringing school concepts to life and connecting students to the natural world using the outdoors as a classroom without walls," said Melanie Biersmith, the Georgia 4-H Environmental Education state Extension specialist.

"I could teach about [these topics] in the classroom all day long, but when the kids actually get out and get their hands

on the activities and participate, they are [having] experiences that they will always remember," said Carol Payne, a teacher from Rome City Schools who has brought her students to EE programs for nearly two decades.

"We've had kids that this is the first time they've ever seen a campfire or the ocean," she said. "It's just a great program and I wish all of the kids in the state of Georgia got to participate."

While the programs emphasize science, lessons also touch on history, language arts and mathematics in

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Diane Davies (center) cuts the ribbon at the Rock Eagle 4-H Center museum that now bears her name.

Honoring a visionary

Museum named for Diane Davies

Story and photos by Sharon Dowdy

The natural history museum at Rock Eagle 4-H Center was recently named in honor of Diane Davies, the now-retired Georgia 4-H educator who created the Georgia 4-H Environmental Education program in 1979 with a \$300 budget and a basketful of dreams.

Davies was instrumental in the museum's creation, and she wasn't shy about using creative and unconventional ways to generate funds for exhibits, like asking the Georgia Egg Commission to fund the dinosaur egg exhibit.



Georgia 4-H State Leader Arch Smith (right) unveils the sign at the natural history museum, named for EE program founder Diane Davies (left).

"I approached them saying, 'kids are already interested in dinosaurs, this is one way you can get them interested in eggs,'" she said.

UGA Extension Associate Dean Beverly Sparks remembers the early phases of the museum design, and Davies' passion for the project.

"I toured the building with Diane when I was a young UGA entomologist," she said. "Diane lit up when she told me what her vision was for the museum as she pointed at the blank walls."

First housed in the Barkaloo-Rich Building at Rock Eagle, the museum has played an important part in teaching children in the Environmental Education and summer camp programs about the world around them.

"I wanted all the (Environmental Education program) resources, like the museum, to be a window to the world for the thousands and thousands of children we serve in this program. To see the enthusiasm for learning in their eyes, there is no greater reward than that," Davies said.

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addition to promoting team building and communication skills.

"I have seen those 'light bulbs' go off in [students'] heads as they make connections between what goes on in nature and what goes on in their daily lives," said former instructor Sarah Gray (MAL – Ag Leadership, '10).

For the seasonal staff, the program is often one of their first professional experiences after graduation, and an opportunity to put their knowledge and communication skills to use.

"Working as an environmental educator has impacted my life far more than any other decision I have made," Gray said. "I had never felt like I was making such a real, tangible difference in people's lives as I felt when I was working for Georgia 4-H EE. This position is not only fun, but gives [instructors] the opportunity to grow both personally and professionally."

Many instructors take the skills they acquire from teaching youth about environmental education to other professional roles, from national park rangers to schoolteachers to nature center naturalists — including Gray, who now serves as an education manager for the Orlando Science Center.

According to Diane Davies, former state Extension specialist and founder of the Georgia 4-H Environmental Education program, they also carry with them the program goals, values and curriculum. In turn, these resources are used by or adapted for other organizations both nationally and internationally, impacting the lives of youth not just in Georgia but also across the globe.

For more information about the Georgia 4-H Environmental Education program, visit georgia4h.org/ee.