

140 YEARS OF SERVICE

Pair of 4-H Volunteers Not Slowing Down

By Patti Drapala

Mississippi has 7,500 adult volunteer leaders serving more than 101,000 youth enrolled in 4-H. Two of those volunteers, Lucille Williams of Canton and Thelma Wood Harris of Natchez, have served for a total of approximately 140 years.

What's remarkable about these two ladies—and their tenure in 4-H—is that they have no intention of slowing down.

Williams, 89, and Harris, 90, were born in an era when there was no 4-H program, particularly for black children. The foundation for such a program developed through the network of Extension Negro home demonstration agents working within the black community. Those agents taught families how to utilize every available resource on the farm to make food, clothing, toiletries, furnishings and medicine.

"As children, we learned to take what we had and make what we needed," Williams said. "Nothing ever went to waste because there were no supermarkets to go buy essentials in those days."

Home demonstration agents also worked hard to get people involved in the betterment of their communities by focusing their efforts on education, service and opportunity. Their leadership soon resulted in the formation of a 4-H program for black children. Eventually all Mississippi youth would benefit from the merger of two separate systems to create the dynamic and culturally diverse 4-H program of today.

"So many of the leaders in Extension, such as Ethel Robinson, who was my first demonstration agent, had strong character and set an example for me to follow throughout my life," Harris said.

Another pioneer in the statewide 4-H movement within the black community was Flora Parrish, who served as home demonstration agent in Madison County. Williams remembered the efforts of Parrish to organize 4-H clubs for black children and to establish a recreational outdoor camp that would strengthen the ability of the 4-H program to provide additional learning activities.

"Mrs. Parrish reached out into the community to secure the land for a camp and, appropriately, the camp was named in her honor," Williams said. "We had a swimming pool, a lake nearby and cabins."



Volunteer leaders Lucille Williams (left) and Thelma Wood Harris (second from right) have a combined service of more than a century to the Mississippi 4-H program. Congratulating them on their accomplishments are MSU Interim President Vance Watson and State 4-H Program Leader Susan Holder.

As a result of community leaders who were intent on creating educational opportunities for minorities, Harris attended Tulane University in New Orleans, where she studied nursing. She later received certification from the Red Cross and was a nurse in Adams County. She also married and happily farmed with her husband. Never far from her thoughts was her love for children, which motivated her to become a volunteer leader for the Sageville 4-H Club in Adams County.

Williams also pursued higher education, attending Jackson College (now Jackson State University) to earn an educational degree. She taught mathematics, English, reading, speech and history in public schools while raising five children with her husband. In her spare time, Williams served as a volunteer leader with the Busy Bee 4-H Club in Madison County.

Both women remain a volunteer leaders for those clubs to this day.

"Volunteer leaders, like these two women of strong faith and willpower, give of themselves to make a difference in the lives of young people," said Harvey Gordon, state 4-H specialist and coordinator of the volunteer leader development program. "It would be impossible for Extension to provide quality programs for youth without the support of dedicated people."

Both women have plans to attend future 4-H events. Harris is eager to attend another Southern Region 4-H Volunteer Leaders Forum at Rock Eagle 4-H Center in Georgia. The last time she traveled to the forum, she was recognized as the oldest volunteer there.

"I have 160 acres that I still farm, I keep my horses and cows on my own pastureland, and I have a garden to raise my own food," Harris said. "I still want to show children that it is important to learn how to do something and take care of yourself so you can be self-sufficient. Being a 4-H volunteer allows me to do just that."

Being a 4-H volunteer has yet another unexpected reward, according to Williams.

"The children I worked with in 4-H who are now adults will meet me on the street and tell me, 'Miss Lucille, do you remember when we went there or did this?' When you serve as a 4-H volunteer leader, you reach people that you never dreamed of influencing."