

# youth on stage

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Two hundred seventy bored young faces, chins sitting on hands, looked back at the speaker. He was telling participants in Maine's 1979 Youth Conference that they'd be singers, dancers, actors, technicians, and "advance men" for a performance by all of them 3½ days later. The Extension agents who were video-taping or sitting in on the opening session of Maine's Discovery '79 could see the expressions of disbelief.

Faces reflected what they thought:

"No way I'm going on stage."

"This is like school."

"It's a history class."

"I don't want to be read to."

"What am I doing here?"

Thirty minutes later, the Extension staff could *hear* the progress. Five different performance, or creativity, groups were getting into the program, although tentatively. The strains of a hardly recognizable tune floated in the hallways. Some very anxious moments had passed in that first hour because a lot of people had expressed doubt that 270 kids could become involved in 1 performance that would be good enough to show to the public, produce personal and group accomplishments, and show the civil war and civil rights movement in 3½ days of creative and performing arts.

Right up to the last dress rehearsal, the planners had their doubts. But the show removed those doubts once and for all, and demonstrated the limitless capacity of young people to do what many think is beyond them. The acting director of the Maine Extension Service was visibly moved and said afterward that he'd come to the performance out of a sense of obligation, but was soon a spectator caught up in the excitement of the event.

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## How Happened?

### *Youth's Curiosity*

How did all this happen? We think there were three primary factors, the *first* of which is universal. Young people will try most anything, especially if they're a part of what's happening. Those of us who've been around a little longer are usually the ones who find reasons to be reluctant about trying something new. But every leader and agent inherits the natural curiosity of young people. What we do with it will say a lot about our program's success.

Maine's Extension staff helped open the doors of discovery for the youths planning the conference. More important, they didn't put a foot in the way, or say, "But that won't work!" Agents and specialists contented themselves with the logistics and process of planning, which wasn't an easy task. All agreed the planning would have been more efficient if the staff had done it themselves, but the real challenge was letting the kids struggle with their ideas.

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### *Planning Involvement*

The *second* key to this program was the involvement of the kids in planning the conference. To do this, the state was divided into cluster units. Each cluster was responsible for a different segment of the planning process—program content, mechanics evaluation, and social entertainment. Consequently, the idea to do something with the creative and performing arts was the youths'. They decided on it 1 wintry night when 4-Hers from 2 counties were planning what to do at this year's Older Youth Conference. Three months later, the program planning cluster had taken their performing arts concept to the cluster group responsible for social activities. The activity group had been thinking about theater performance for entertainment. The magic of the marriage of ideas worked and Discovery '79 was born.

During the first three months of planning, the kids became more and more possessive of their ideas and what they hoped to accomplish. One event illustrated the extent of their control of the program. At the second of 2 state-wide planning meetings, the question of non-4-H youth delegates to the conference came up. Many of the youths who'd been involved in the planning wanted no part of non-4-H kids. The Extension staff was appalled at this elitist

attitude. After the issue was talked out, it was clear that this wasn't a question about 4-Hers being "better" than non-4-Hers. The issue was one of discipline . . . the youth planners were worried that *their* program might be disrupted.

Plans were made to ensure discipline (the conference was so exciting, involving, and exhausting that discipline was never really a problem anyway) and fears were laid to rest. With 25-30 youth participating in the planning process, there was a strong core of committed participants who exerted peer pressure at the beginning when it was most needed. They said, through their actions, "Hey, don't worry about feeling stupid or foolish, we're doing it too."

*Superb Resources*

The *third* factor was just as important. Extension staff found a superb resource for teaching self-discovery through the performing arts—the *America's Spirit* performance group from Hyde School, in Bath, Maine. The headmaster, Ed Legg,



*4-Hers rehearsing for Maine's Discovery '79 performance.*

and each student/teacher that was involved, helped us find out something about ourselves. The Hyde School students themselves were an important aspect of the teaching resource. They constantly challenged the participants, encouraging team competition via the show sections. At the same time, the Hyde staff took pains to explain each moment of the show, what the background meant, and how the individual performances affected the whole. They did a great deal of teaching on how to communicate with body language and expression, using themselves as examples.

They served as kindred spirits and provided a sense of security for the participants. Their enthusiasm and willingness to try was easily transferred to conference participants. Some are still writing each other long after the conference. No one was concerned about finding a Baryshnikov or Ella Fitzgerald, or trouping on down to Broadway. But as sections or "blocks" of the show improved, there was enthusiastic support from the others. Everyone sensed that being a part of something much larger called for personal risk taking and this required a unity of purpose. Pride in this "learning by doing" was as natural as could be. The playback on TV monitors of the morning or afternoon sessions was a highlight and showed staff, resource people, and youth a benchmark of progress.

An interesting sidelight was the growing pressure as Saturday's performance grew closer. One or two sections of the show had come under sharp criticism and we were curious and worried about the kids' reactions to it. But, they simply worked harder, in one case saving a scene they'd written in themselves.

## **Discoveries**

So, what did we discover? For one thing, we learned the performing arts have a tremendous potential as a vehicle for teaching 4-Hers expression, developing self-confidence, and a sense of self-worth. There are roles and functions for anybody and everybody, from acting, singing, or performing to business management. In addition to functional activities, the arts fostered expression and education in any issue and offered us a unique opportunity to fire and develop the imagination of young people.

In our case, we said something about Maine history, freedom, slavery, the farm ethic, and war. The moods depicted in the show required an understanding of these by the youths. The performance itself demonstrated that they'd understood them. The young planners and eventually the participants "owned" the program. Planning by participants was cumbersome

and used a significant amount of staff time. But, the return on the time was invaluable.

We also realized that we're capable of letting another agency with expertise demonstrate the 4-H "learn by doing." *In retrospect, this had the advantage of allowing us to fall back in a support role and concentrate on various aspects of the conference. Some of us worked at program levels and some at logistical levels, but in any case, the kids felt free to rely on us as they reacted to the pressure of performing on stage.*

Finally, we realized that there are resources "out there" to help as long as we look for them. (The next conference, for example, deals with Marine education, and is being held at the Maine Maritime Academy located on Penobscot Bay.)

## **Summary**

The performing arts are a lot of fun and can generate *enthusiasm and excitement. We've taken the lid off 4-H in Maine and there are at least 350 4-Hers, leaders, and staff who believe we can do just about anything. As the show director put it, the "new frontier" in America is its people.*