

Highlights of Extension

TYING RESEARCH TO REAL LIFE



A Foundation in 4-H

Solomon “Sol” Boucher of Tolland exemplifies the 4-H motto of making the best better. Sol has taken the foundation in leadership and citizenship skills developed through the 4-H program to a global stage, impacting his community, and a wider audience.

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In 2003, 10-year old Sol joined the Mighty Mix 4-H Club. Deb Couture and Felicia Johnson, his mother, served as co-leaders. Sol was elected president by his peers, and maintained the post through 2010.

The 4-H fair is a highlight of the year. Mighty Mix sold simple, historic toys such as Jacob’s ladders at the fair each year. In addition, Sol and his fellow club members set up and ran kids’ games, donating proceeds to the Tolland Soup Kitchen. Sol entered his photography in 4-H competitions, winning best of show at the State 4-H Photo and Art Contest in the junior division in 2005, and senior division in 2008.

Connecticut 4-H members hold demonstrations in the New England Center at the Eastern States Exposition, or Big E. The Mighty Mix attended for five years, the first two years demonstrating their wooden toys. Then, Sol had the idea to connect

a camera, laptop, drawing program, and printer. Club members took photos of interested fairgoers, converted them to computer-drawn likenesses, and printed them in black and white. Attendees could color the drawings, or take home the black and white version; it was a big hit for the three remaining years club members ran their booth.

Going Green at the 4-H Fair

Sol served on the Tolland County 4-H Fairboard from 2006-2010. The annual advertising campaign is critical to the success of the 4-H Fair. Members raise funds by soliciting advertisements from local businesses for the 4-H Fairbook. In 2009 and 2010, Sol was the highest salesperson, and inspired other 4-H members to sell more ads, then passed down his list of willing donors. He had a broad view of the 4-H program, and tackled numerous challenges throughout his service on Fairboard.

“Sol was dismayed by the huge amount of garbage at the 4-H Fair, and the absence of recycling,” Felicia explains. In 2008, Sol and fellow 4-H Fairboard member Alix Moriarty formed a green committee, and Sol asked his father, UConn Extension Educator Jude Boucher, to serve as advisor.

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“The green committee initiated buying recyclable tableware and cutlery for the snack bar, and purchasing recycling bins to be placed beside every garbage can. They included instructions about what could be recycled. At the end of the fair, Sol and Alix enlisted the Mighty Mix members and parents to sort through collected bags of recycling to separate out non-recyclables. It was a hot and dirty job, but they persevered,” Jude says.

The Green Committee held demonstrations about energy-saving strategies and products during the fair. Sol created a stand with illuminated LED, CFL, and incandescent bulbs connected to energy monitors that showed how much electricity each was using. He also had an outside table where fairgoers could play with toy solar cars.

Across Connecticut, people were talking about the green initiative at the Tolland County 4-H Fair. Sol and Alix gave an hour-long demonstration on living a green lifestyle at home, and steps one could take to make a local 4-H Fair green at the 2009 4-H Volunteer Conference, and again at the Association of Connecticut Fairs Convention in 2010. His peers recognized Sol with the 4-H Fair Exceptional Service Award in 2009.

A Bright Future

Gifted in computer science, Sol was a member of the RAGE Robotics team in high school, and shared his knowledge

with 4-H. He dedicated many hours each year setting up computers for entries at the Tolland County 4-H Fair. His robotics team brought their robot to the fair, and Sol arranged for an engineer to exhibit various solar inventions, and a Honda hybrid car modified to achieve over 100 miles per gallon.

He competed in Quinnipiac University High School Programming Competitions, and also volunteered to teach basic computer skills at the Tolland Senior Center. Sol graduated from Tolland High School as the salutatorian, and went on to Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT). The RIT computer science (C.S.) undergraduate program involves five years of study, including co-ops.

“Sol’s first co-op was as a research assistant for the RIT computer science department, writing code for robotic obstacle detection and avoidance,” Felicia says. Another co-op involved programming for a tech startup company in Rochester, New York, developing an encrypted “purse” for bit coins. “His subsequent co-ops were spent as a software engineering intern at Google, Inc., first based in Seattle, Washington during the summer of 2013, and later in Mountain View, California for the summer of 2014, and the spring of 2015.”

Sol studied in Croatia during the spring of 2013, was an honors freshman orientation mentor at RIT, a math tutor at the RIT Academic Support Center, and served

as an executive board officer in various capacities for the RIT C.S. Community. He also participated in C.S. programming competitions as an undergraduate. During two school breaks, Sol was in Quebec, studying and improving his French language skills. Staying true to his green 4-H roots, he led an effort resulting in the addition of recycling bins to every dorm kitchen throughout the university.

Sol graduated from RIT ahead of schedule, and received numerous awards while there, including the RIT Presidential Scholarship, RIT Outstanding Undergraduate Scholar Award, and the Norman A. Miles Award for Academic Excellence. The Miles Award recognizes a student entering his or her last year of academic study with the highest GPA across the university.

In 2015, Sol began a 6-year Ph.D. program in C.S. at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, one of the nation’s top-ranked C.S. programs. Sol has helped a professor at Carnegie Mellon resurrect a Teacher’s Assistant Advisory Committee to support fellow graduate students that are also teaching. Showing his usual green outlook developed while in 4-H, Sol succeeded in getting the owners of his apartment complex to improve their recycling services. Sol demonstrates that youth who learn perseverance and develop self-confidence early in life can have a positive influence on the world around them wherever they go.