

Highlights of **Extension**

TYING RESEARCH TO REAL LIFE



Photos courtesy of the UConn 4-H FANs IM program.



Teaching **Fitness** and **Nutrition** with Fun

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The Connecticut Fitness And Nutrition Clubs In Motion (CT FANs IM) is a 4-H STEM after-school and summer program and integrated research project, educating third and fourth graders in nutrition, fitness and gardening. The program is presented in collaboration with area 4-H clubs.

CT FANs IM is supported by a five-year \$2.5 million grant from USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) and is an offshoot of the original 4-H FANS program, which also focused on fitness and nutrition for school-aged children and their families.

"We're bridging community connections with Extension, by serving youth and families in under-served areas," says Umekia Taylor, associate educator and project director. "With the startling statistics on obesity in our country, I find it exciting to promote healthy lifestyles by combining nutrition and fitness in programs that engage our youth."

Taylor has assembled a team that includes German Cutz, extension educator in sustainable families and communities, Nancy Rodriguez, professor in the department of Nutritional Sciences (NS), Shawn Mogensen, NS graduate assistant, program administrator Rineicha Otero, and program assistant Linda Castro. 4-H Healthy Living Liaison, Wanda Hamilton, retired this year after fifteen years in the UConn 4-H program. She was instrumental during the 4-H FANs program development.

"Ms. Wanda was an inspiration to me and to other 4-H youth," says Rineicha Otero, CT FANs IM program administrator. "She was always supportive and dedicated by encouraging us to step out of our comfort zones to reach our goals." Otero joined 4-H as a teen mentor, and then became a supervisor while pursuing her degree at UConn. She graduated in 2012.

The CT FANs IM program kicked off at Meriden's Roger Sherman Elementary School in October 2012, and has since expanded to include several additional schools in Meriden and Danbury. 4-H teen mentors

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4-H FANs IM Success Stories

Aaron is a Nutritional Sciences major at the UConn College of Agriculture, Health, and Natural Resources. In 2014, Aaron was an intern with the Danbury 4-H FANs IM program, mentoring high school students to become 4-H FANs IM teen mentors. He says, “4-H FANs IM gives a holistic view to health, by showing the students how to balance healthy eating with exercise.”

Cheyenne was a 4-H FANs IM teen mentor in 2013 and 2014. She says, “Being a teen mentor helped prepare me for college. This job has given me a good sense of the working world.”

Najeia served as a 4-H FANs teen mentor for two summers beginning in 2010. Najeia says, “It provided a real world experience, and allowed me to take a leadership role while learning many new skills.”

Angie’s two sons, as well as her nephew and niece participated in the 4-H FANs program. She soon began implementing many of the lessons in her family life. She says, “We started making little changes. I stopped riding the bus, and began walking. We bought a blender and started making smoothies. We switched from whole milk to one percent.” Angie replaced sugary snacks with fruits and vegetables. She took her family to the park to play games or walk around the grounds. These little changes made a big difference.

work with students to engage them in fun activities that promote health, including fitness games, healthy meal preparation and gardening. Special guests such as chefs, fitness experts, and master gardeners are brought in to work with the children and their families. Children prepare healthy snacks and learn how to make fitness part of their daily lives.

During the original 4-H FANs program, parents requested an opportunity to join in on program activities. They wanted to bring those healthy lifestyle changes to their entire family. In response, monthly 4-H family nights were created, where families spend an evening together exercising and creating healthy meals and snacks.

“The youth in the program absorb the material and are very receptive to the information and activities presented,” says Castro. “Parents are happy to see their

children excited and motivated.”

The gardening program provides experiential learning where students engage in practical skills, while applying their lessons in nutrition and fitness. Several school gardens serve as an outdoor laboratory for the students. The youth maintain their gardens during the summer program. Produce is harvested and used in food demonstrations or taken home by students to cook for meals. Gardening gives them an opportunity to work together as a team, while providing fresh produce, exercise, and lessons in healthy meal planning.

“The program is promoting positive social change in the community by educating young children on essential skills,” says Otero.



(Photo, other side) Rineicha Otero and Linda Castro (far right) with two 4-H FANs participants at a family night. (Above) Fitness games are an integral part of the 4-H FANs curriculum, teaching youth to make fitness a part of their daily lives. (Left) A chef prepares healthy snacks at a 4-H FANs event. (Tools & Training image) Youth from Connecticut FANs IM at the 2015 state 4-H Citizenship Day in Hartford.

