Volunteer Retention: Can One Volunteer Make a Difference?
By Kay D. Brown, Escambia County 4-H Agent

Volunteer retention is a picture of the total success of the 4-H program in Escambia County with 93% of volunteers re-enrolling as volunteers each year. The opportunity for youth to develop caring relationships with adult volunteers in the 4-H program expands their ability to achieve leadership, communication, and decision-making skills that will shape their choices as adults. Retention of volunteers creates the consistency that youth need to maintain adult caring relationships with 4-H volunteers. You have a picture of true dedication and volunteer retention when adults are still volunteering after their children or even grandchildren are no longer a part of the 4-H youth program.

Enhancing volunteer experience and satisfaction is clearly a key element in successful recruitment and retention. Volunteers need to have positive experiences as a 4-H volunteer—feeling valued and having positive relationships with the 4-H program staff. Volunteers also need to feel satisfied in their role as a volunteer by believing that what they are doing makes a difference, and the 4-H program is meeting important needs. (Arnold, Mary, El., Brooks, Doteze., Rennckamp, Roger, A. 2009)

A 4-H volunteer of fourteen years experience with Escambia County made the following comment, “I feel that one volunteer does make a difference because without volunteers programs are not able to take place. As a volunteer I know that it’s important to do so because so many don’t take the time and the child is the one who is left behind. Growing up as being a part of 4-H makes me want to give back because of all those that did the same for me. I have worked with children and have seen firsthand how it helps the children. When a child is not accepted by others it causes hate and anger and in most cases the child is lost forever. Being a volunteer gives me the opportunity to help those who might get looked over. This past weekend just while out shopping a child that had not seen me in over 10 years knew that I was at 4-H Camp Timpoochee and I was the nurse that gave medicine. I didn’t remember her but she remembered me as that volunteer and said to me it was really fun going to camp. Yes, one volunteer can make a difference in so many lives. But without the volunteers some children would be lost.”

It is a wonderful experience to see volunteers continue to serve the 4-H youth in Escambia after their children have “graduated” from 4-H after high school. There are over twenty volunteers who continue to volunteer in the 4-H youth program as project leaders, judges, club leaders, advisory committee and foundation members.

One 4-H volunteer of 23 years said he continues to serve 4-H because he believes in the 4-H goals and standards for youth. He enjoys seeing the youth grow in leadership skills and return to 4-H as young parents with children of their own to start new 4-H clubs for their children. He stated that the skills that youth learn in 4-H are life skills that will carry over in their college experience and career choice. He said that he wants to give back to the community what 4-H gave his children during their 4-H experience.