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Illini Prairie CEO Program excited to learn about local businesses

By Kendra Hennis
 The last year has shown us more than ever the importance of investing and supporting our local businesses. The Illini Prairie CEO program helps students gain professional experience needed to aid them in the business world to be successful, while allowing them to explore and learn more about local businesses and earn credit for school.
 The Illini Prairie CEO Program (formerly Douglas County CEO) was founded in 2017 and seeks to “prepare people, especially youth, to be responsible, enterprising individuals who become entrepreneurs or entrepreneurial thinkers and contribute to economic development and sustainable communities.” It is said that, “the CEO program is much more than a textbook course. Rather, students are immersed in real life learning experiences with the opportunity to take risks, manage the results, and learn from the outcomes.”
 The program is calling Tuscola “home” for the first five weeks, where they will learn more about the community and the businesses within it. Students will be touring local businesses, hearing from community leaders, and beginning their



The 2021-22 Illini Prairie CEO program, pictured in front are facilitator Hannah Kremitzki Myers, Adeleigh Ross, Dakota Freese, Kenzie Fornshell, Makenzie Herschberger, and Kelly Toto. Pictured in back are Zack Ozier, Adi Patel, Thomas Brown, Tyson Macaulay, Alex Kuhns, and Brady Urban.

class projects during this time. Their first week, the class met with Whitney Heredia at Whitney Heredia Photography to learn more about her business, how she markets to her customers, and the opportunities she has in the area. CEO students also look forward to learning more about TNB Bank, Vintage Karma, Tuscola Stone Company, and many more while in town. Follow-

ing the five weeks, students will move to Arcola and then Sullivan, allowing them the opportunity to get versed on many community businesses.
 This year, the Illini Prairie CEO program is led by facilitators Mac Condill and Hannah Kremitzki Myers, and is comprised of 11 students from Tuscola, Arcola, ALAH, and Sullivan from 7:30 to 9 a.m. through the

week. The 2021-22 class consists of Thomas Brown, Tuscola; Kenzie Fornshell, Tuscola; Dakota Freese, Sullivan; Makenzie Herschberger, Tuscola; Alex Kuhns, Arcola; Tyson Macaulay, Tuscola; Zack Ozier, Sullivan; Adi Patel, Tuscola; Adeleigh Ross, Sullivan; Kelly Toto, ALAH; and Brady Urban, Tuscola.
 Unlike a traditional class, facilitators are not there to

“teach” but instead to bridge the gap between students and the information they need to succeed. Students learn how to set themselves apart in the classroom and workforce; and are encouraged to dress professionally, be punctual, and be accountable. The program was designed for students to get out and get real world experience with businesses, make connections, and start their own business-

es. Throughout the year students will be working on an individual business as well as a class business.
 The businesses are a large portion of the class. These can be any kind of product or service that can be viable in the community, and are entirely up to the students to complete. Students will use their strengths

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Deer donation program to expand food access in twelve central Ill. counties

One in 10 people in Illinois struggles with hunger every day, including one in eight children, according to Feeding America. When families are hungry, making healthier choices can be even more difficult. A new project focused on expanding food access was recently allocated funds through University of Illinois Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Edu-

cation. The Health Equity Achieved Together Project is a multi-disciplinary project with Illinois SNAP-Ed and other programs within University of Illinois Extension. Programs will develop and implement innovative strategies to improve health outcomes and reduce community barriers to healthier lifestyles. Working with others across Extension enables the HEAT Project to lever-

age their expertise and networks across Illinois, thereby maximizing the positive impact on the health of Illinois families. The Illinois Deer Donation Program Pilot will connect meat processors, hunters, and food pantries in twelve central Illinois Counties: Clay, Coles, Cumberland, DeWitt, Douglas, Effingham, Fayette, Jasper, Macon, Moultrie, Piatt, and Shelby. By engaging

hunters to donate their deer and meat processors to produce ground venison, a local source of lean protein will be available to food pantry clients. Clients will also receive recipes and resources from Illinois Extension to help them prepare venison at home, which might be unfamiliar to some individuals and families.
 “This will be an opportunity for hunters to help

tackle food insecurity in their communities while doing something they enjoy,” said Michelle Fombelle, Extension SNAP-Ed educator. In addition, HEAT Project awardees will engage with local stakeholders and community members as they design and implement their initiatives. Projects will also plan sustainability and inclusion strategies to ensure that the projects have

long-lasting community impact.
About Extension
 Illinois Extension leads public outreach for University of Illinois by translating research into action plans that allow Illinois families, businesses, and community leaders to solve problems, make informed decisions, and adapt to changes and opportunities.

Discussing testing sites at University of Illinois with Wilhelm-Barr

By Tony Hooker
 The phrase “She wrote the book on it” is sometimes overused. However, in Laura Wilhelm-Barr’s case, it’s true. She was the creative force behind the University of Illinois’ COVID-19 testing sites, literally writing procedures manuals as she went, and spearheading the logistics behind the daily testing numbers which at times reached 17,000 tests per day.
 For her efforts, she was one of 28 people who were recognized with the President’s Medallion. She recently and rather reluctantly, (she’s all about recognizing her team and isn’t too keen on individual accolades) sat down with me to discuss her herculean efforts at the start of the pandemic.
 So, Laura, you’re kind of a big deal, aren’t you?
 No. I’m not at all. <laughs> I just don’t know how to say no!
 The honor that you received is a big deal, right? Let’s put it like that.
 It was very nice. Very unexpected. It was nice to

be recognized, and I took it as though the entire office had been recognized.
 What exactly is the award called, for those who might not be aware?
 It was the Presidential Medallion. (UIUC) President Killeen presented it to 28 of us. He’s not done that before in his tenure here, so we were very honored to receive it.
 What was the basis for it?
 On our campus, the folks who received the honor were part of the shield testing and tracing program. We helped set up the testing site ecosystem and develop the app that is still being used today.
 Did you graduate from Villa Grove?
 Yes, in 1989.
 What is your job title?
 Senior Director of Special Events.
 In 1989, walking down the halls of VGHS, did you think to yourself “Some day I’m going to be the senior director of special events?”
 No. Never! Not at all. I went to the U of I and got a degree in English, went to



Villa Grove’s Laura Wilhelm Barr is flanked by UIUC president Timothy Killeen and Chancellor Robert Jones as she receives the Presidential Medallion.

work for a publishing company and I thought I would be a book editor. I found that pretty boring, truthfully. I’m much more social than sitting in the back with a little red pencil, editing manuscripts. The first year I was there, they asked me to be involved in setting up a conference in Virginia Beach. I thought “this is awesome! They’re paying me to travel and to set up this conference!” It was all about the details

and communicating what was needed for the conference. I got into special events at that time.
 Your role at Human Kinetics then evolved to the point where you were doing events planning?
 Yes, I was there for three years and then a position opened in the chancellor’s office, and that was 1996. My mom had worked there (UIUC) for her entire career, and I thought it would be a nice

place to work, and I’ve been there ever since.
 What are the keys to being successful in your line of work?
 It’s just a matter of being detail oriented, communicating about what needs to happen, sticking to a timeline and being focused on the end result. The shield COVID testing sites were not anything I would have equated with the job title I currently have, but when we were no longer having in person events on campus, they came to me as asked if I could set up the covid testing sites, find locations on campus. I’ve been here a long time, so I know a lot of buildings and I know how to set up tents and how to get facilities and services involved with everything from the electricity needs and technology needs and the equipment and materials that we would need to set it up. That’s how I came to be doing covid testing sites, when I would normally be focused on special events like commencement or new student convocation, or things like that.

Illinois was recognized all over the world for their innovative methods of testing, and you were a part of that?
 There were so many of us who were involved in the beginning. We were all working seven days a week. It was a huge endeavor at the time, and still is, truthfully. Four testing sites are still up and operating seven days a week. In the beginning, we opened 18 testing sites on campus and so we had a very quick ramping up of that. I was asked to help with setting up the sites in May, and by July we were opening testing sites. From a science side, they had been working on the saliva test for months.
 That science is no longer exclusive to Illinois, right?
 The University of Illinois has expanded that to high schools all over the state, and Parkland College is one of them. We’ve had calls from all over the country asking us how we did it, and all the credit

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