

# Highlights of Extension

TYING RESEARCH TO REAL LIFE



## Engaging Communities With UConn PEP

In 1993, Extension Educator Cherry Czuba and a social services coordinator in a Windham low-income housing project taught family life information and community development strategies to five natural leaders in the community. Each participant committed a year, attended ten 2-hour training sessions, went to monthly meetings, and addressed community issues through projects. In 1994, Cherry worked in Vernon to address growing crime. Then, a VISTA worker was obtained later that year to conduct the program in Brooklyn and Danielson.

Partnering with Extension educators Cathy Malley and Ede Valiquette brought the program to Danbury, Manchester, Hartford, East Hartford, and West Hartford. Additional VISTA members allowed expansion to Vernon, Enfield and Meriden.

From these initial programs, the UConn People

Empowering People (PEP) program was founded in 1996, and steadily grew. Over two thousand people have graduated from the UConn PEP program in the past twenty years.

UConn PEP is a personal and family development program with a strong community focus. Building upon individual life experiences and strengths the program encourages growth in communication, goal setting, problem-solving skills, parent and family relationships and community involvement. Cherry retired in 2013, and Cathleen Love, Ph.D., UConn Extension Professor, now coordinates UConn PEP.

While participating in a UConn PEP program, the participants set goals, develop relationships and make connections. They also find their voice, share stories, and begin to believe they can make a difference.

An early participant from Enfield reflected on the program, "UConn PEP changed my life for the better. If it weren't for UConn PEP, I wouldn't have the job I have today. UConn PEP helped give me the drive to want something better and gave me the confidence to

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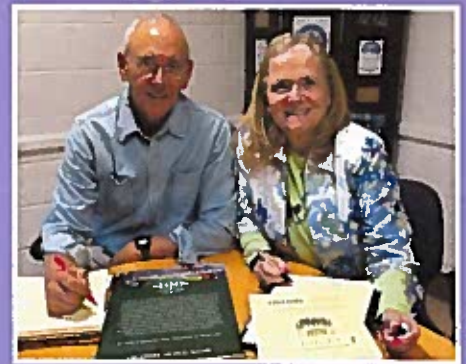
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*“PEP participants realize their leadership potential and take action to invest in themselves, in their families and in their communities.”*



believe that I could do it. It also helped me be a better parent.”

UConn PEP expanded to other states, including Michigan, California and Missouri. Cherry worked with a professor from South Africa to establish the program at the University of Pretoria. The program continues to have a broad reach, with Vermont and Florida actively teaching PEP programs in 2016.

In the words of one of the recent UConn PEP graduates, “I learned from every UConn Extension PEP participant in my wonderful group. I re-learned things like trust in groups. I came to appreciate different lifestyles and different ways of thinking, living, caring, sharing and teaching. The UConn Extension PEP program helped me renew my faith in how wonderful people are. It has reopened my eyes to how important differences are in people, in every aspect, but yet in the end how we really are the same and that we, each one of us, can make a difference.”

During the UConn PEP program, one woman set a personal goal to go to college. She is now working on her bachelor’s degree. She believed she could do it, set her goal, and her passion and commitment gave her the courage to follow through on her dream to go to college.

The student says, “The opportunity to participate in UConn Extension PEP changed my life. I had begun to feel unworthy, unintelligent, unappreciated. This program built and renewed my

confidence in myself. For that I am so appreciative.”

PEP participants realize their leadership potential and take action to invest in themselves, in their families and in their communities. The program continues to grow through support from our partner organizations, including school districts, nonprofit organizations and faith-based communities.

In partnership with the Center for Applied Research in Human Development (CARHD) a questionnaire was administered to all participants before programming began (i.e. pre-test) and after programming finished (i.e. post-test). The pre-test questionnaires contained close-ended questions to measure self-assertive efficacy, sense of mastery, parental satisfaction, family problem-solving, communication, and community engagement. The post-test questionnaires included the same questions as the pre-tests, as well as open-ended questions that asked participants about their overall satisfaction and feedback about the program. Based on the data, CARHD assessed the effectiveness of the programs.

Key findings from the analyses of the close-ended questions were that UConn PEP participants:

- 1) Showed significant positive changes on self-assertive efficacy and sense of mastery.
- 2) Showed significant positive changes on parental satisfaction and family

problem-solving and communication.

- 3) Showed significant positive changes on community engagement.
- 4) Overall were very satisfied with the program.

Responses to the open-ended questions indicated that participants found the program to be useful and helpful. They felt that the community project was beneficial to the surrounding communities and provided an opportunity to be involved in their community. Overall, the participants showed improvement in all three targeted areas (individual assets, parent/family relationships, and community engagement) following completion of the program.

The UConn PEP program has positively influenced communities across the state, as over 50 towns have had programs in the last twenty years. Looking to the future, UConn Extension has created an account at the UConn Foundation, the *Cherry Czuba UConn PEP Program Fund* to provide permanent support for the program.

“I enjoyed every moment of our classes,” another participant shares. “I loved the stories we shared, the tears we shed, the laughter, the trust within the group and the comfort we felt in sharing and speaking with one another. Our ‘PEP’ talks empowered us to accomplish or obtain something. Every moment, every word, every tear, every laugh and every lesson will be a permanent tattoo, not only in my mind, but in my heart.”