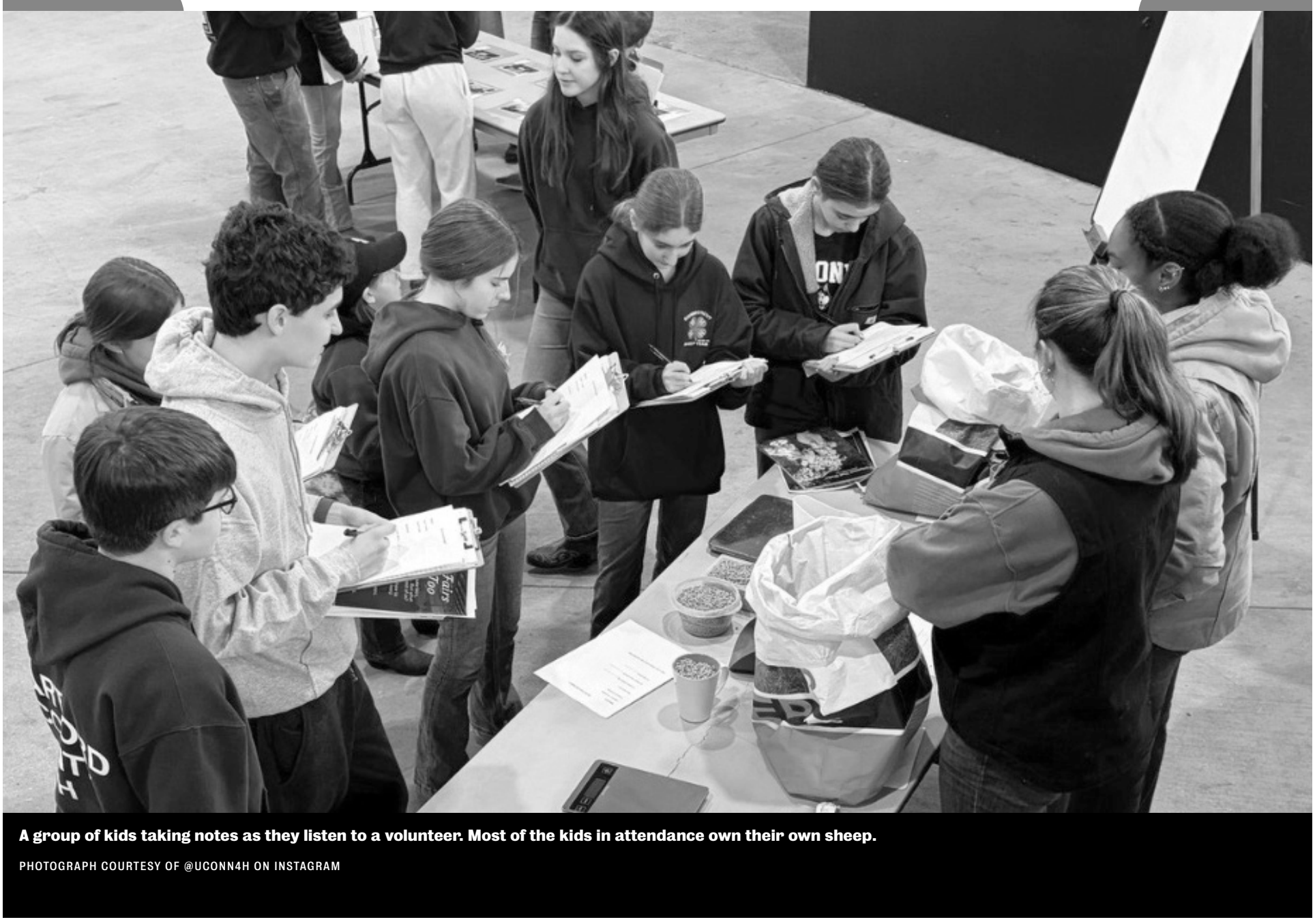
YOUNG STUDENTS LEARN HANDS-ON AT UCONN 4-H SHEEP DAY



A group of kids taking notes as they listen to a volunteer. Most of the kids in attendance own their own sheep.

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UConn 4-H hosted Sheep Day on Saturday, Feb. 7, educating youth participants about how to properly take care of their animals inside the Ratcliffe Hicks Arena.

UConn 4-H is a youth development program of UConn Extension. The mission of 4-H is to assist all youth ages 5-18 in acquiring knowledge, developing leadership and life skills while forming attitudes that will enable them to become self-directing, productive and contributing members of their families and communities, according to their website,

The yearly event, targeted at kids ages 7-18, hosted a series of workshops on the floor of the arena and classrooms, with families invited to look on from the bowl seating inside the arena.

"People have come from four states to be here," said Bonnie Kegler, a 4-H extension educator. "We encompass all of New England, so kids committed and adults committed to this. This was a big deal."

Kegler ran one of three stations that participants rotated through early in the event, with Kegler's focusing on measuring food. Other activities included matching breeds, learning about barn equipment safety and working with four live sheep on the floor of the arena.

Most of the kids in attendance own their own sheep, Laura Marek, a retired 4-H educator of 39 years who helped with the event, said.

The event is designed to teach them the proper ways to care for and prepare them for public shows.

"The kids want to learn about sheep; they get to learn about sheep," Marek said.

Despite their ages, participants are often in different places in their learning and experience due to factors such as family exposure, Kegler said.

"There can be 10-year-olds here with five years' experience and a 16-year-old who is just starting out," Kegler said. "I never assume that a younger person doesn't have that much experience just because they happen to be like elementary school age. It will surprise you."

Kegler described many of the nine and ten year olds who attend the event as "sharp."

Kegler emphasized the inclusivity of the event and the effort that was put into ensuring all participants could take something away from attending.

"We give everybody a piece of paper and a pen," Kegler said. "

You can all write something down, and if not, you're at least hugging it and you feel like you're a part of the group. We don't discriminate. You may only be in first grade, but that's okay."

The expectation for most of the kids is that their projects will reach the county fair level, Kegler said.

"These guys are the fountain of youth," Kegler said.

"They are just open vessels. Look at how excited they are and they're holding their attention. You've got the visual kids so you're writing things on a whiteboard, and then the complete hands on; they're actually holding onto a sheep because going out into the ring and leaving the barn means, 'I've got to learn how to make this thing socially acceptable and presentable.' There is just nothing greater."



A volunteer and student tend to a sheep. The UConn 4-H Sheep Day taught children aged 7-18 on how to take care of farm animals.

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