



## Message from the District Director

Once again, it is my pleasure to share the results of another successful year of partnership between Mecosta County and Michigan State University (MSU) Extension. With your continued support, our team at MSU Extension has been able to make a difference in the lives of youth, families, businesses, and Mecosta County residents through our broad range of research-based educational programs and services!

In 2023, our MSU Extension team worked to empower families and individuals to live healthier lives, supported new and local businesses, created opportunities for youth development and career exploration, helped farmers with business management and mental health awareness, and much more. Our staff live and work alongside Mecosta County residents, are rooted in community relationships, and are responsive to community needs.

Our partnership with you makes this all possible. On behalf of the MSU Extension team serving Mecosta County, thank you for another great year. We look forward to your continued support and hope you'll be able to join us during one of our upcoming programs.



**Eric Karbowski,**  
District Director

## Mecosta County Staff

- Christi Demitz** – Health Educator
- Cora Okkema** – Dairy Extension Educator
- Maribel Richards** – Program Instructor, Youth & Family Health
- Karen Ripke** – Secretary
- Nikki Bancroft** – 4-H Program Coordinator
- Nikki Witbeck** - Community Nutrition Instructor

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**62**

Extension Programs held in the Mecosta

**2,529**

People attended programs held in Mecosta

**1,762**

Number of residents from Mecosta County who attended MSU Extension programs

**552**

Number of participants from Mecosta County who participated in SNAP-ED programming

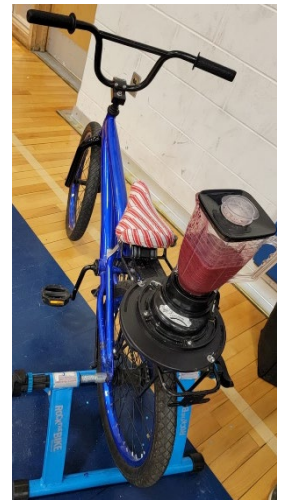
# 4- H PROGRAMING 2023 OVERVIEW

As the largest youth development organization in Michigan, 4-H provides thousands of young people with experiential learning opportunities to explore new interests and discover their passion. In her role, Nikki Bancroft works with the community to enhance and empower the Mecosta County 4-H program through volunteer and participant recruitment, program development, partner engagement, and assessing program effectiveness.



*"As a lifelong member of the 4-H community, I am truly excited to be a part of an organization where I can use the knowledge and skills that I've learned to support the continued growth and development of youth in Mecosta County! In my role, I intended to provide a safe, inclusive, and welcoming learning environment that will support existing programs while fostering the development of expanded opportunities for the youth in our community."*

**Nikki Bancroft**  
4-H Program Coordinator



284

Number of youth enrolled in 4-H

33

Number of Adult Volunteers

248

Organized Groups

## Breakfast on the Farm 2023

Breakfast on the Farm is a community engaged event facilitated by MSU Extension that is designed to showcase Michigan farms and introduce the public to modern agriculture. This educational event gives consumers and farm neighbors a first-hand look at modern food production and emphasizes the importance of environmental stewardship, food safety, and animal care.



The Okkema family of De Grins Oer Dairy in Blanchard Michigan, hosted Breakfast on the Farm in 2023. The family-owned farm welcomed visitors for a free breakfast and self-guided tour of their property and facilities.

## Health & Farm Stress Update

Farming, ranching, and agricultural production are mentally and physically demanding occupations. MSU Extension's farm stress team is committed to providing education, tools, and resources to the agricultural community. Misty Oebel is a Health and Farm Stress Educator with MSU Extension that works alongside producers and key gatekeepers in Mecosta County teaching them the skills & knowledge necessary to recognize the warning signs of stress, indicators of suicidal ideation, and connects them with resources like MSU Extension teletherapy program.

**Misty Oebel**  
Health & Farm  
Stress Extension Educator



## Michigan Vaccine Project Overview

To help residents of Mecosta County make informed decisions about vaccinations, MSU Extension partnered with the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services to create the Michigan Vaccine Project (MVP). MSU Extension's statewide network of county offices and community partners provided the residents of Mecosta County with evidence-based information about the role vaccinations play in helping protect Michigan's children and adults from life-threatening diseases.

Through this initiative, Maribel Richards and the MVP team implemented a statewide campaign using digital media, radio, print materials, and in-person programming to help Michiganders' make informed choices about vaccinations.



## Health Educator Updates

MSU Extension offers the diabetes PATH program. This program is a six-week self-management workshop designed to help people take an active role in managing their diabetes. The PATH program meets the American Diabetes Association's Diabetes Support Initiative criteria, a measure of high-quality programming.

One participant shared, "Both classes changed my life for the better because I now know that in order to have the kind of life I want to live, I must eat healthy and exercise. The two are like yin and yang. You can't have one without the other. I feel like I have graduated from both classes. I feel confident going forward with how to live a healthy lifestyle."

Tai Chi for Arthritis and Falls Prevention helps people with or without arthritis to improve balance, both mentally and physically, which helps significantly reduce the rate of falls experienced by older adults. Other benefits include improving relaxation, vitality, posture, and improved immune system. Studies have shown that tai chi can reduce falls by nearly 70%. The program focuses on confidence building, which is linked closely to the reduced rate of falling.



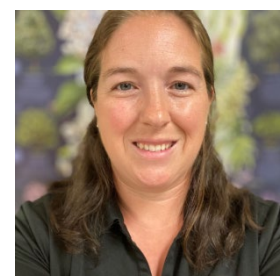
**Christi Demitz**  
Health Educator

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## Master Garden Program

The MSU Extension Master Gardener Program is an adult horticulture and volunteer leader training program committed to improving science-based horticulture education for Mecosta County residents. The Master Gardener Program trains, supports, and certifies MSU Extension Master Gardeners. The groups of Master Gardeners educate communities on research-based horticulture science and spearhead local community gardening projects.

*"As a graduate of MSU and former intern with MSU Extension, I'm thrilled about the opportunity to serve our local community as the Master Gardener Program Instructor. My strong local relationships and vested commitment to support sound horticulture practices, gets me excited for the future of the Master Gardener program in Mecosta." - Danielle*



**Danielle Schrock**  
Master Gardener  
Program Instructor

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## SNAP-ED Updates



Nichole (Nikki) Witbeck is the new Community Nutrition Instructor working for MSU Extension. Witbeck provides both in-person and virtual nutrition and physical activity education to SNAP-Ed eligible audiences. She also offers support to her Mecosta community partners who want to make policy, systems, or environmental changes to improve the health of their communities.

*"I am looking forward to working with the Mecosta County community through MSU Extension as the Community Nutrition Instructor. As a former teacher and certified wellness coach, I am excited to share my passion of educating and helping others learn to improve well-being by using the multitude of resources and knowledge provided by MSU Extension."*

**Nikki Witbeck,**  
Community Nutrition Instructor

One program offered by MSU Extension's SNAP-Ed program is Teen Cuisine. This program is a hands-on cooking opportunity that teaches students in grades 6-12 important life skills about making healthy choices.



Students in Mecosta County were taught how to measure, chop, dice, sauté, and plate healthy recipes. With the supervision and guidance from MSU Extension SNAP-Ed instructor (Renee Sanders), the students gained confidence and expressed excitement to re-make the recipes during the summer while they were on break.

## Dairy Educator & ERAIL

Accidents involving livestock occur throughout Michigan and preparing first responders to effectively respond to these accidents is a goal of MSU Extension's emergency response to accidents involving livestock (ERAIL) team. Cora Okkema is a member of the ERAIL team with MSU Extension which provides tools and resources to help animal control officers and first responders in Mecosta County develop their skills in working with large animals. Often, first responders do not have experience working with large animals when responding to emergencies therefore, MSU Extension has assembled several tools and resources to help first responders during these unforeseen circumstances.



**Cora Okkema,**  
Dairy Educator

## Field Crops Educator

**Monica Jean,**  
Field Crops Educator

Agricultural production is a leading industry in Michigan and MSU Extension provides research-based field crop production recommendations and resources to producers in Mecosta County. Monica Jean is a Field Crops Educator who assists farmers with a variety of commodity production expertise including corn, soybean, edible dry beans, potato, and integrated crop and livestock systems through educational programs, fact sheets, bulletins, articles, and individual contacts. Jean also supports the agricultural community with cover crop, soil health, nutrient management, and cropping system research projects.



## Financial Educator

As a HUD-certified counseling agency, MSU Extension provides potential, current, and future home buyers with education about the obligations and responsibilities of purchasing a home. Teagen Lefere is a Financial Homeownership Instructor who works side-by-side with Mecosta County residents to help them understand the complex home buying and renting process and teaches them the true costs of homeownership.



**Teagen Lefere,**  
Financial  
Homeownership  
Instructor

*"Teagen, thank you so much for all of the help from the start and to the finish, with many phone calls and e-mails to you when needed, and keep up the wonderful work that you are doing because you are the very best at it! We need MIHAF, MSU and HUD all collectively CLONE YOU so that you can help so many other Homeowners in the same situation as I have been in for the last 2 years."*  
– Program Participant

## Food Safety Educator

ServSafe<sup>®</sup> is a nationally recognized certification program for those working in the food service industry that is provided by MSU Extension. Kara Lynch is a Food Safety Educator who is trained and credentialed to teach the ServSafe curriculum. As part of her role, Lynch teaches Mecosta County residents about foodborne illness, forms of contamination, food safety management systems, safe facilities & pest management, cleaning & sanitizing, and how to train employees about the latest food safety issues.

*"Thank you very much for a great class. Excellent presentation, well organized, great discussions, nicely paced, interesting real-life stories. You're a great ambassador for MSU and the Extension Service."* – program participant



**Kara Lynch**  
Food Safety Educator