My 7-year-old son sings all day. He hums, he makes up songs, he belts out his sentences like he’s on Broadway. This is something I didn’t realize until the pandemic gave us the opportunity to spend lots of time together.

This spring, as the realities of social distancing and sheltering at home turned into remote work, school from home, and bans on in-person meetings, there was a collective gasp of youth development professionals across the nation as we plunged into how to accomplish the work of helping young people feel connected and included in their communities when restricted to their homes. While part of the appeal of extension work is that no two days are ever the same, there is much of youth development work that is cyclical and event based. It’s through these events that much of the work of learning leadership, citizenship, and life skills is accomplished. So, how does that happen without the events and that in-person interaction?

In Dickinson County, one of the first connection strategies made available to our 4-H clubs were Zoom licenses provided by the Dickinson County 4-H Foundation. Clubs can meet as often as they’d like through phone or internet, for as long as they’d like. I have to admit, I’ve found it delightful to read the 4-H club reports in our local papers. From one of the first reports stating that I’d hosted the club meeting from my home in northern Dickinson County, to the detail that because they met online, club members were able to see an entire Lego project that would never have been brought to a meeting, these reports make me physically smile. This isn’t just our youth making the best of a situation, they, their families, and club leaders are creating an entirely new club environment in which to thrive.

Another connection strategy for our youth was through the creation and implementation of 4-H Innovation Labs. Every Wednesday for the past six weeks, a group of 4-H youth development agents have hosted two sessions of environmental science and technology for about 90 elementary school aged youth and one session of computer programming and circuits for 45 middle and high schoolers. From its inception, we knew that these sessions had to be engaging and hands-on in order to be successful. Participants were mailed a packet with supplies for each lesson which were then taught live during a Zoom session. In six weeks, we’ve studied and built projects related to the water cycle, robotics, wind energy, and rocketry. Youth have also dug into dissection with owl pellets and flower pollination. As youth development professionals, we’ve learned that you don’t have to be in the same room to see learning and discovery taking place. That excitement translates across screens.

And that brings us back to the 7-year-old at our house who is still humming and belting out his favorite camp songs following the virtual 4-H campfire. If you haven’t taken the time to enjoy a good call and response camp song yet this summer, I encourage you to take a look at the video on our Facebook page (K-State Research & Extension – Dickinson County), it’s a good half hour of favorites from the Purple Power Pack 4-H Camp Group. While we weren’t able to sing together at Rock Spring’s Council Circle, through Zoom and Facebook Live, we were able to create a camp experience, unlike any other.

This year is unlike any other. I’ve heard my son in a way I’d never heard him before and I’ve experienced the resiliency of our 4-Hers, their families, and leaders in a way I’d never imagined. As we head into this year’s 4-H/FFA only Tri-County and Central Kansas Free Fairs, we know they will be unlike any fair we’ve experienced. While the fairs won’t be open to the public, I encourage you to continue to contact us, interact with us, and let us know how we can better help you at K-State Research and Extension – Chisholm Trail District.

Find us at: @ChisholmTr_KSRE on Twitter and Instagram to follow along with where our journey goes next!