

4-Hers forever, the Chatcolab experience

By Janell Marmon

Mother's Day 1977, for one-time 4-H leader, Montessori teacher/director, and Peace Corps alumnus, Sally Heard (third from right in photo), was a new beginning. Her car, jammed tight with the belongings and excitement generated by five 4-H teenagers, headed west for Coeur d'Alene, Idaho. It was the beginning of her 50-plus year attendance at the Chatcolab Northwest Leadership Laboratory.

"Little did I suspect that the experience would change my life and add many friendships, more experiences than I can count, and new directions for my whole family," Heard wrote in response to a workshop 'assignment' on June 17.

Heard graduated from Butte High School in Montana in 1951. 71 years later, she could be found last week teaching a small group of labbers, the Chatcolab name for attendees and alumni of their 75-year-old program, how to do yoga poses. Her small, limber body shaped itself into a pretzel in a conference room that looks out on Twinlow Camp and Retreat Center on Idaho's Lower Twin Lake.

The lesson was impromptu, in a class about inclusion for a group of attendees that ranged in age from 29 to Sally. Others

joined her in working and studying together. They also joined her on the floor at her prompting. It was a lesson in exercise, but also one in making the presenter, Mary Driskill's, point about what inclusion is. Driskill, at age 16, was diagnosed with a neurological disorder that she inherited from her father. Today, the young, upbeat teacher from South Carolina, speaks to others about inclusion.

"Everyone's needs are different. Inclusion means acceptance," Driskill said, looking around the room.

Indeed, that is Chatcolab's mantra over a week of camp in Idaho's Bitterroot mountains. The program is a family camp that mirrors 4-H. Many of its participants have that organization in common. Sally was a 4-H leader for more than 30-years. Others attending met at Chatcolab as teenagers, ambassadors of their own 4-H clubs.

Brian Saylor and Mary White attended Chat in the early 1970s. Salyer, a retired engineer, reflects on the changes in Chatcolab since he was a teen. White, a retired school district employee, began Chatcolab 2023 as a reluctant writer who'd given up the hobby when she was young out of frustration. By the end of camp, she was writing again, and sharing her work.

"It's still about sharing and about learning leadership skills through recreation," Salyer said. "It's still about friendship and about discovering new things."

Born in the Northwest out of offices and through the hard work of the Northwest's Land Grand Universities, the recreation laboratory began in the early 1930s at Walden Woods, Michigan, borrowing from an older model for education, the "Chautauqua," from New York. This model of Chautauqua draws labbers to a new program each year that supports leadership, culture, education and recreation. Students of all ages are teachers, as well as participants.

"I was encouraged in 2017 to apply for a Peace Corps program," Heard said. While she wouldn't be able to go until 2019, Heard, then in her 80s, took with her to Botswana the skills she'd gained while working



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Annette Chandler (center), Great Falls, Mont., demonstrates Mendala stone painting to a group of ladies in one of Chatcolab's College of Hidden Arts and Talents sessions. The format allows attendees to bring their expertise to lab to share with others. Teachers span the generations and offer a wide variety of subject areas from nature to art, culture to cooking, log rolling to languages.

for and directing a Montessori school. "I also had all of the lessons and experiences I'd gained from Chat."

Heard recently self-published a year of her journals. "Number 56," she told the Reporter. "I would never have done it without Chatcolab. It is in there, whether I was writing from camp or not."

For 4-Hers and other recreational leaders, Chatcolab is about learning how to lead recreation in fun and exciting ways. While the 2023 lab included sessions on organizational strategic planning, inclusion, sourdough bread making, Dahlias, painting rocks and in watercolor, creative writing, leather crafts, and silk scarf dyes, it also borrows strongly from collaboration and other skills necessary in leadership.

Past labs have featured outdoor skills including sailing, canoeing, kayaking, orienteering, and fishing, as well as quilting, crocheting, and a large variety of talents that echo 4-H achievements, including STEAM-driven lessons.

"There's something for everyone," Betsy Carver, executive director of Boise's River Discovery, said. Carver serves as Chatcolab's registrar and works



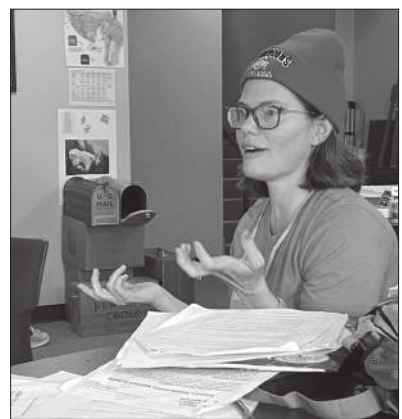
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Twinlow Camp and Retreat Center for years has been the location of Chatcolab Northwest Leadership Laboratory. Located just outside of Rathdrum, Idaho's on the Twin Lakes in the Rocky Mountain's Bitterroot Range the camp is a family camp experience, specializing in leadership training that is rich in 4-H history and culture.

with their board on marketing its program. Her parents, daughters, grandmother, brother Brian, uncle, aunts and several other family members have all been Chatcolab labbers.

Chatcolab Northwest Leadership Laboratory is currently putting together middle to late summer mini-labs in Idaho,

Montana, Oregon, and Washington. They are also hosting a no-cost zoom session in mid-August for those in North Dakota and beyond, past/current 4-Hers and leaders or not, wishing to see what Chatcolab is all about and to experience its model. For more information, visit Chatcolab at www.chatcolab.org.



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Mary Driskill, Lyman, SC, presents a session on Inclusion, a mainstay of leadership knowledge. Calling on octogenarian Sally Heard to assist, Driskill showed that everyone is able to do what they can and want, based on their abilities. The two had participants out of their chairs bending, moving, and doing yoga moves.

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