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BOZEMAN, MT—Roubie Younkin knows how to get youngsters excited about science and engineering. A Valley County Extension agent, Younkin teaches children in Hinsdale’s 4-H after-school program how to conduct electricity using playdough, build a stomp rocket that shoots through the air, engineer a tinfoil boat that supports the weight of pennies without sinking, and turn an ordinary toothbrush into an eco-bot—a vibrating robotic device that cleans up a small oil spill.

These real-world science and robotics applications not only engage students, they provide an early introduction to the burgeoning STEM field. In Montana, careers in science, math, and engineering are among the best paying jobs, with workforce needs expected to grow significantly over the next 10 years, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Younkin will share her approach for several STEM and robotics projects with instructors in Helena’s after-school program on Friday, January 24, 8 a.m.-noon, at Central Elementary School, 420 N. Warren Avenue.

According to Sandra Germann, executive director of the Montana 4-H Foundation, Younkin has “developed best practices for actively engaging students in a program that’s very hands-on.” Extension programs operate “in every county in the state,” with 20,000 youth involved in 4-H statewide, says Germann.

The 4-H Foundation, which celebrated 50 years in 2019, is raising funds for a STEM specialist position to work with extension agents throughout Montana. The foundation has been awarded a matching grant from the Gianforte Family Foundation, which also funded the STEM/robotics kits for 4-H programs in several Montana counties.

“The possibility of a new STEM specialist,” Germann says, “will enable the 4-H extension offices to do more complex programming.” Currently, workshops are run by volunteers such as Younkin. “The systems are in place and the curriculum is developed,” Germann asserts.

In addition to her STEM work, Younkin serves as the Youth Development and Family and Consumer Science official for Valley County. Her work spans from offering Life Skill Development opportunities for youth to financial and estate planning and healthy living education, including Strong People and Diabetes Education programs, for adults. “It’s all fun,” she says, noting that her work in science stems from “great interest and passion.” The 4-H program hopes to instill youngsters with that same passion through STEM Projects.

The Montana 4-H Foundation is a non-profit corporation supporting the continued development and growth of the statewide 4-H program. For more information, contact Germann at 406-994-5911.