# Transcript: Season 1 Episode 4 Dustin Blakey

**JoLynn Miller**: Alright. Well, thanks for joining us. We have Dustin Blakey. Is that how you pronounce your last name, Blakey?

**Dustin Blakey:** Yes. That’s right.

**JM:** I thought so. I've known you for so long. But okay, so Dustin Blakey is the County Director and the horticulture slash farm advisor in Inyo and Mono counties. His work is listed under… in his work- excuse me- other duties as assigned, as some of us county directors know we have other things to do: He helps with the Master Food Preserver in his program, Master Gardeners, 4-H, and a bunch of other things in his county.

He's especially excited about volunteering to lead fun 4-H projects like entomology, sew your own monster, micro-bit and more. One of the things that I love about Dustin is that he posts amazing pictures of his hikes and adventures with his dogs out in the desert and in the remote wilderness. So I think that's one of your hobbies as well, is photography and out being outdoors! So welcome!

**DB**: Glad to be here!

**JM:** I ask this question of everybody at the very beginning. So, you know, Marvel comics, superheroes. Every superhero has some sort of origin story how they became their superhero. And so I'm curious what your origin story to being a 4-H volunteer, and in this case, Extension staff member is.

**DB:** Well, you know, I didn't even know that Cooperative Extension was a thing, like most people. Yeah, I was not involved in 4-H, although I did know about 4-H when I was a kid. But you know, that was the kids that had animals, and I lived in a little housing subdivision so that didn't, you know, why would I do that? I went to college, and when I was in grad school my major professor was the state specialist for horticulture.

And so one of the things that I got assigned was, I ran like the horticulture contest for the FFA and for the 4-H that he was in charge of. And, you know, because that's what assistants do, you know? And I didn't even know what Extension was, but I really thought it was kind of cool, all these things he did. So I decided to go into Extension as a career instead of sticking with working in greenhouses like I'd been doing before.

And that’s how I got involved.

**JM:** Your first extension job was in Arkansas, you said?

**DB:** Actually, surprisingly, no. It was in California. I was staff research associate in Lake County for a couple of years. And that was during a time when funding was kind of tight, and there wasn't really any chance at that time to get hired as a advisor. So I left and went to Arkansas and got hired there.

**JM:** That's so funny. I have similar a similar background that I grew up, not really knowing what 4-H was. I rode horses, but I didn't. I lived in a subdivision, and it was never. I don't even really talk, think, talked about in the part of LA that I grew up in. But I found out about Extension after undergrad before grad school, because I went to school to be a high school Ag. teacher, and decided I didn't want to get up early in the mornings for feeding animals. And so I was like, what am I gonna do? And then I also, I worked in Extension in Montana. So we both have experience in other states, which I think you and I both know that California extension is run a little bit differently than other states.

**DB**: But a little bit. Yeah.

**JM:** So well, that's a really cool story. So, most of your volunteer work, or most of your 4-H projects have been kind of quasi-staff led and volunteer led right. I mean, there's not really a distinction sometimes between staff and volunteer when you're leading these projects in your counties.

**DB:** You know, we only have tiny staff, and we're kind of short on volunteers. So everybody does everything.

**JM:** What’s the population in the counties that you that you work in again. It's tiny.

**DB:** Yeah. I think the 2 counties together, or maybe like 25,000 people. But you know, it's like 8% of California's area.

**JM:** What advice would you have for new volunteers? Because I again, I think you're offering this valuable perspective of a staff member that is also leading projects. So you have, you know you have the you know what's coming down from like the State 4-H office; you know some of the policies; but you also, I think, know a little bit more than some other staff members what it actually take to lead a project. So what advice would you have for new volunteers, or even some that have been around for a long time, but are looking for inspiration?

**DB:** Well, you know it’s kind of strange. It works like for volunteers like it does for the youth. It's like a *spark* thing. And so, you know, there's something that interests you and you wanna share it, you know. And so you know, although my background's in horticulture, I like messing around with geeky things like electronics and stuff like that.

And so you know that's why some of the projects I've done that have been, you know, like coding and things. That's why I've offered those. I'm interested in that. And you know, in our rural area there's just not a lot of opportunities for kids to get experience for that, or even know that it's a thing; so you know, I'm excited about it. And that's the first thing is just, you know. Be excited.

And then, you know, the little logistic things are all that's next is like, well, where we gonna have that. And you know, as staff, I don't necessarily have a program rep who's solving that problem for me. I kinda have to do that. My projects are so weird that they wouldn't know what I needed anyways. So what I what I found, though I mean like little tips. You know, once you find a place and all that, I try to make it as easy as I can for the kids to participate. So, these are complicated projects with things you have to get like entomology. You gotta have pins. And you know a box. And there's there's *stuff* right. And for the electronic things you have to get, you know, whatever the little machine you're gonna be using, or you know, whatever the software is, gonna be that sort of stuff. All has to be kind of lined up. So a thing that I think is really makes my life easier. Is I put together like a little, either a list or a kit that they could just get right to. Sometimes I've even known, like for entomology, I just buy the pins that they need, and you know, they're not that expensive.

**JM:** That’s what I was going to ask is, do you do some fundraising for certain projects or get donations from local tech businesses- if there are any in your area- to help offset some of these costs so that youth aren’t having to pay or how do you do that?

**DB:** We don’t have anything like that and you know, if the people here have some sort of technical background, it tends to be like environmental or biological sciences. I mean, that's just who would be in the Eastern Sierra. We're not exactly a tech hub but I try to keep it really cheap. I mean these. What I pick is purposefully chosen. That it's not going to be very expensive, like. For instance, one year, II use the micro bits, which is this little, basically a computer on a thing that's the size of a credit card, and they're used in the UK. I think, whatever they call fourth graders over there. But they all, you know that that's part of the curriculum over there. So there's a whole infrastructure that's already in place, and it's in English. You know, there's the all the software reading is pretty much free. The board is only about $15, you know, and then in INYO county in particular, all students in the county have either a Chromebook or an iPad, or something that's it's just issued to you. So you know the end on the kids, part of having whatever equipment like a computer they would need is not an issue.

**JM:** Are you dealing with Internet connectivity issues and some of the locations that you're meeting as well? And how do you overcome those? Or do you just meet in places that have Internet?

**DB:** Yeah, we meet at places, have Internet. So the fairgrounds. Has excellent Internet. And then the office of education. We can meet there if we need to. And they've got good Internet. Or you know, we can even do schools if we have to. So Internet hasn't been a problem for those kind of projects. But that's because we've planned for it.

**JM:** Cool. I noticed, and I think this whole conversation started because you posted on Twitter about some sort of coding… cool… computer. It looks like a computer game that you were having- that you were preparing for. So tell me about that project, too. Is that different than the micro bits?

**DB:** I think. Yeah, it is so the original thought with micro bits is these are like physical computing. Right? So you hook sensors up to it, and you program it and and stuff. So there's a thing you gotta get. And the kids, passion actually all seem to not be like hooking doodads up to a machine and measuring stuff, or even they can communicate with each other and stuff. They didn't really like that. And and actually, because we don't really have many opportunities for kids to get exposed to the tech stuff. Really, they're really kind of behind the curve there on the skills that I would think they would need to really be successful. So what I decided instead is well, let's just focus on doing something with games. Because that gets them excited right? And then there's this platform called Bitsy, which is a kind of a game engine that's very, very simple and essentially there's no coding you know. You can. Just kinda you still have to think of logic right? We just kinda hide the coding behind little buttons and stuff. but they think through what they want it to do. And and it just kind of goes in the dialogue. And it it's more a system that's about telling a story rather than making something like space invaders or Minecraft. There's nothing like that fancy. It's it's kind of a graphic version of walking around and talking to stuff, maybe picking up things like an old school kind of game experience like an old school.

**JM:** Like Zelda. That sounds like oh, Zelda!

**DB:** Oh Zelda’s probably a little bit more fancy than these.

**JM:** What I what I love about this project is it's still is. It still follows that whole kind of thriving model of like kids finding their sparks, feeling connected if they're all in the same room working on different games, but they can ask each other for advice. They probably build a portion of the game. It doesn't work. They have to reassess, you know. So it's like that whole goal planning like this is what I think I'm gonna do. It didn't work. How do I reassess? How do I fix it? How do I move forward? Right?

**DB**: That’s the goal.

**JM:** Yeah. Well, I just I, what I love about 4-H, is that really this, the thriving model, this whole idea of it, doesn't matter what the topic is. These kids are learning these problems solving life skills.

**DB:** Right? And I'm offering this because I mean, I think it's interesting, but because there isn't any other opportunity to round. I mean kids that may have the spark, you know, interest in computers and stuff, they don't have an outlet for it around here. And so that's why I offer it. I mean, ultimately, there are people way more qualified than me to do this. But I know enough to be dangerous, so I do it well,

**JM:** and that's what I think so cool about being a volunteer. You don't actually really need to be an expert, because it's so. It's so. Youth led, and part of the learning experience is not knowing, and it's a really good example as an adult to say,” I don't really know. Let's figure this out together.”

**DB:** And you don't have to be an expert. They're kids right? They know less than you about it. You just have to know… It's like, you know, when you're trying to run away from the bear, you just have to be faster than the guy you're with. So long as you know more than them, and enough to be helpful, and then you've had some experience with you know how youth learn and what gets them excited , then you can do it. You don’t have to be an expert.

**JM:** I love that advice. And what I think also is really cool about it is you talk about we don’t really have tech in the eastern sierras but I think maybe by planting this spark maybe these kids are going to have some tech and then maybe they're gonna come home. And start a startup at home, because that's what they're interested in. And so then maybe in a few years you'll have some tech in in your counties. Who knows

**DB:** One of the kids that took the micro bit class a few years ago. I mean, he just graduated this year same class as my daughter. And he's gonna go study computer science. So I think that's kind of cool. I mean, it's not my fault that he's studying computer science. But it was, you know, a skill that he got to get some practice with, and I feel kinda cool about that.

**JM:** That's so cool. Well, we're gonna transition a little bit. We're talking about like some good, happy, like exciting things. I'm gonna ask you a question about your biggest challenge that you faced in leading 4-H projects.

And how did you tackle it, or what are you facing right now? And how are you tackling it?

**DB:** It's always the same here. We really have a struggle of getting volunteers. You know, I think there's people out there that would really help. But again they feel either intimidated or that they have to be an expert so they don't really want to get engaged, you know. And since COVID, people have been less excited about getting engaged in general. But as far as, like me, leading the project, or really on most of our projects, it's finding volunteers. Especially, you know, we like to have two youth-checked adults. And so that makes it a real challenge. Yeah. So I mean, in practicality, what's happened, you know, we cross our fingers that it's gonna work. But you know, I'm the only leader. Which isn't the situation you wanna be in, but it ends up working out, because we are a small group and a lot of the kids that are enrolled in 4-H have a parent who is a leader, you know. So, I end up when we do these kind of bizarre projects like sewing monsters and stuff that we end up with 2 adults. But it's kind of luck more than than anything else.

**JM:** So and what other, I guess like, what advice do you have for then other volunteers I think volunteers get overwhelmed, too. So they one volunteers like, “I'm just gonna do one project.” And then they get asked to do so many other things. So what do you suggest? Volunteers for kind of recruiting friends and family like

**DB:** You don't have to do it all, too. That's the other thing, right, you know. We tell them that we don't expect you to do it all. We do have office staff that can't help with some of the stuff that that you're probably spending a lot of time on and easy for us to do and then you, it's okay to use family and friends. And you know, same with club leaders. You know, they feel like they have to run everything with the club. But you know, if you can just ask at the meeting who can bring snacks next meeting. You don't have to bring snacks, but they don't necessarily realize that folks want to help. You know. They may not want to go through the formal process of becoming an actual volunteer, but they are a resource that you can use.

**JM:** That's super helpful. And I love that. You talk about the office. I think that's one thing that maybe is under-utilized. Maybe not. But I think the volunteers that I know that are successful, the ones that I've interviewed for this podcast thus far have really just talked about their relationship with the with the county Extension office and the and the 4-H program rep and what they're able to help with. And so I do think that volunteers really should start building that relationship with their with their staff person. If there is one. Obviously, we know that there's short staff across the state.

**DB:** But yeah, especially technical kind of stuff. I mean, there are things that I really wish the volunteers would do more of that. My office staff spends a lot of time doing just because we don't have enough volunteers to handle everything, and they're asked to do so many things that there's just not the resources, but there's other things that we do, anyways, that would really, you know, work out. We can help with you know, sending messages, or you know I don't know whatever they they need, or we can least help bounce ideas off of who they might be able to talk to, to, to get that answered. But it's not really that insurmountable.

**JM:** I think, even like finding resources, you know you. You know the advisors in the county are really a little bit more connected. Not necessarily just the 4-H. Advisors, but any advisor in the county are connected with the research. And technically, we're a research based youth organization, right? And so you know, we have this network of county, state, international resources that we know are evidence-based research based curriculum ideas that we can help leaders with like they don't even have to really come up with the lesson plans. If they don't want to. We we can connect them with those tools

**DB:** Right! I mean, like. there's kids that want to do pet projects, you know, and you don't have to be an expert on cats. You know. But we have a curriculum on cats.

**JM:** you know we do have a cat…there's one, I think, called pocket pets or something?

**DB:** Yeah, there's also my daughter did the cats one year, and she, you know, she really was into cats when she was little. We had a cat project!

**JM:** I, Dustin, have a friend in Montana still, that her son is in the cat project in whatever county in Montana, and they actually have a cat showmanship during the county fair; which I don't think we do in California, and I think that would be something that that fair would have to again, because California is different. The fair would have, we don't have, you know, separate, 4-H show.

**DB:** We have a pet show at our fair!

**JM:** Do you?

**DB**: Yeah. It’s different. It’s not like formalized, like a real cat show would be. Which, surprisingly enough, I've been to a cat show now. But it's more like a, you know, parading your pet around sort of the thing.

**JM:** but it's a good culmination to the end of whatever project it is.

**DB:** Yeah, when we don't offer a cat project right now, I mean, there's just no one who's willing to lead that, and we probably don't have any….Cats are kind of a strange thing in the Eastern Sierra. Dogs, on the other hand, everyone's got two or three dogs.

**JM:** Yeah, wow, I love it. I love just, you know, in the course of our conversation we're talking about micro bit, entomology, cats, and monster sewing, as all the different projects. That's so so fun. So, I guess my next kind of final wrap up question is like, what has been your biggest inspiration in in your role in your job, and as like a 4-H leader. And what keeps you doing what you're doing, cause we all know there's all the the challenges that we talked about. But why do you keep? Why do you keep doing this?

**DB:** I kinda I get it. Well, it’s youth stuff in particular, it's always kind of exciting to see the kids, you know, get older and be successful. We've had a few. You know, I, for whatever reason, I was on the website for my old county in Arkansas, and I happened to notice that the current program rep in my county was one of my 4-H-er's when I was there. You know, and and I remember at one point, it kinda makes you feel old, but it wasn't too terribly long in my career and extension that one of my 4-H-ers was a county agent, you know, like, Oh, wow! That's kinda interesting.

**JM**: One of the 4-H-ers that was, I think she was a junior or senior when I started in my role, coming up on like 11 years ago now, has since graduated high school, gone to college, gone to vet school, and is now a local veterinarian in our county. And she's the the 4-H Vet at the county fair, and I'm like, man that it does make you feel old.

**DB:** Makes you feel old, but I mean that's a really good feeling that - there's a lot that goes on being a kid, you know, with their success and everything. But you know, but at least a little bit, you know I probably helped with, you know. Kind of a good feeling, you know, and it's like that with all Extension work. You know. It's kind of a good feeling, knowing that you helped with something.

You know, that they kind of like, oh, yeah, you know it's kinda worth it all the headaches and stuff with it. But you've done something to make someone's life a little better, but it's just really evident with the 4-H stuff. I mean, there's just no getting around when some kid is, you know, now, an adult and doing well in the community. And that sort of thing, I mean, kinda like, that's the end point of our whole model there. And you can see it.

**JM:** Yeah, I love it. I love it. Well, is there anything else you want to share with volunteers in the state, and maybe beyond about just anything? One last little tidbit?

**DB:** I'd say, just get involved. Don't be overwhelmed. It's totally doable. And there's lots of hand holding.

**JM:** Awesome. Well, thank you so much for spending your morning with us. I really appreciate it. Talk to you soon.

**DB:** Alright, bye, bye.