As a child growing up in the city of Detroit, Lydia Vanderbilt saw concrete rather than trees.

“I knew more about sidewalks and expressways than forests,” she says.

Vanderbilt’s perspective changed during her freshman year at Lewis Cass Technical High School when she became involved with Reaching Environmental Awareness and Action in Communities Together (REAACT), a 4-H program designed to introduce Michigan’s youth to the environment through education.

With a passion to learn more about the environment around her, Lydia transformed her involvement within the REAACT program into a profound career pathway.

Since the program’s launch in 2003, 40 students from Post Middle School and Lewis Cass Technical High School have participated in a multitude of activities that heightened their awareness about the environment. Throughout the program, students conducted environmental water pollution research and participated in a variety of field trips. Students visited the Environmental Protection Agency of Detroit, MI, the Detroit Sewer Plant, and the National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration of Grosse Isle on the Detroit River, all of which gave them a historic perspective of Detroit’s waterways and helped them discover the influence that the bodies of water have had on Southeast Michigan and the rest of the state.

Vanderbilt, now a freshman at Michigan State University, majoring in forestry, attributes her desire to become a forester to her involvement within REAACT. After traveling on field trips and creating games for elementary and middle school children on the effects that individuals have on our ecosystems, Lydia allowed her passion to blossom.
“REAACT changed my career choice and the direction that I wanted to take in life,” she says.

“It has made me strive towards a goal where I can make a difference in my life as well as those around me.”

Gary Williams, Wayne County Extension 4-H Youth Development educator says Vanderbilt is a true role model and a leader among young people.

“She is one of my success stories,” he says. “Lydia has developed into a very mature young lady and is determined to take care of the planet.”

Convinced that REAACT influences the attitude, behavior, and responsibility of each of the youth involved, Williams believes that REAACT is the most impacting environmental program to come out of Michigan State University Extension.

“Each activity that students participate in challenges them to become stewards of the planet,” he explains. “The fact that some of our youth are parlaying that into a career is definitely an added bonus.”

Not only was Lydia a committed member of REAACT, she also wants to commit her future to protecting the environment around her. After completing her Bachelors Degree at Michigan State, Vanderbilt hopes to attend graduate school and work for the Department of Natural Resources as a forester. There, she will be responsible for managing forests, tree populations and ensuring that wildlife is provided with a sustainable habitat.

Emily Ries is an MSU sophomore studying Agriculture and Natural Resources Communications. A native of Sand Creek, MI, Emily enjoys working on her family’s farm and engaging in youth leadership projects.