

Youth learn life lessons in 4-H

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By Kimberly Long, Staff Writer
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Mexico, Mo. -

What do former U.S. First Lady Pat Nixon and songstresses Taylor Swift, Faith Hill and Reba McEntyre all have in common with former vice president Al Gore, NFL player Herschel Walker, NBA player Irvin Magic Johnson, and popcorn king Orville Redenbacher?

All are 4-H youth alumni. Add that to some 30 or more university professors, a few presidents of the United States, and a host of sport figures and you have an idea of the diverse history of 4-H.

More than 100 years old, the youth development program has much to offer children from all environments, communities and families. Audrain County 4-H develops positive, productive and community-minded youth.

"One of the things that a child is going to do is develop, regardless what we do," said 4-H Youth Specialist Eleanor Kloeppe. "And our goal is to guide them toward positive development.

"If we don't give them positive groups to be a part of, there are all kinds of negative groups out there. It's a natural thing that kids want to group with other kids, and 4-H gives them a positive way of doing that."

Audrain County has eight organized clubs, made up of 231 youth and more than 120 adult volunteers/or mentors – who are instrumental to the program and its members, Kloeppe said.

"To encourage positive youth development, you need positive adults; someone the kids can trust and build relationships, other than their parents," she said. And these leaders have a big responsibility. They don't just direct youth through raising an animal, making a poster or winning a ribbon. The real job, Kloeppe said, is about guiding youth to become responsible, contributing adults – which starts with incorporating positive youth programs and things that will trigger the youth' interests.

Recent studies show that youth who spend time in positive youth programs such as 4-H are less likely to become involved in high-risk behaviors, and they have higher school attendance and grades. Additionally, they demonstrate better conflict-management practices and better work habits.

Studies indicate the more internal assets and life skills young people build, the more likely they are to grow up healthy, confident and responsible. Active participation in 4-H helps develop life skills, Kloeppe said.

"The world in education is recognizing the value of 4-H's actual motto – which is learning to do by doing, not just learning about things," Kloeppe said. And a recent report from the National Research Council identified nine characteristics of effective, successful youth development programs that include such things as supportive relationships, opportunities to belong, opportunities for skill building, positive social norms, support for efficacy and mattering, and integration of family, school and community efforts – which together, Kloeppe said "makes for a great 4-H experience."

Audrain's groups, Kloeppe said, are heavily involved in community service and activities designed to promote family involvement.

"Finding oneself begins with losing yourself in the service of others," Kloeppe noted. "Service is a way for members to gain exposure to the large community, indeed the world itself. It is necessary to actively practice and treasure service."

One of the programs the local memberships support is a statewide program called Missouri 4-H LIFE, which is

headquartered at the women's prison in Vandalia, and designed to address the needs of children of incarcerated parents and their family members. The program helps provide a healthy and nurturing family environment. Once a month, family classes are held and the children of the inmates are exposed to 4-H activities.

A multi-disciplinary team of University of Missouri Extension educators and their partners guide the program that is based on the 4-H club model. Four-H LIFE currently operates at three state correctional centers in Missouri – Chillicothe Correctional Center in Chillicothe, Potosi Correctional Center, in Mineral Point and the Women's Eastern Reception, Diagnostic and Correctional Center in Vandalia.

The 4-H groups also gather food and supplies for The Help Center, Angel Ministries and the Crisis Intervention Center. They visit local nursing homes, participate in the Adopt-A-Highway Program, and community beautification in general. Additionally, they volunteer for the annual American Red Cross Relay for Life. One of the more popular programs they support is the Barnyard Challenge and Small Animal Show that invites children with special needs to participate in the County 4-H and Youth Fair.

In this program, 4-H and FFA members are teamed up with a special needs child to help them get acquainted with and show a gentle animal. At the end of the event, medallions are awarded to all participants for their efforts.

"This program serves a dual purpose in my perspective," Kloepfel said. "It helps children who are sometimes left out of things, to be included. And, it also helps 4-H children learn to work with people who have disabilities, and understand and value the time they spend with them.

"It also shows that 4-H has room for everybody, and that it doesn't matter if you have a disability or that you may not be perfect. In 4-H you don't have to achieve a certain level to be a part of it. Just being yourself is enough."

This year's Barnyard Challenge will be held Saturday. Registration starts at 8:30 a.m., and the show opens at 9 a.m.

Four-H also uses many different projects to engage youth in their areas of interest. Statewide, members complete an average of three projects per year that can gain them exposure at the State Fair held in Sedalia. These projects can include a wide range of interests – animal care, photography, arts and crafts, country hams, pies, jams, woodworking, floriculture, quilting, shooting sports, archery, sewing among others.

Active participation in these competitions, Kloepfel said, helps guide youth to acquire new work, and gain a sense of belonging, independence, mastery and generosity.

"In 4-H project learning experiences the youth set goals, make independent choices and decisions, and gain a sense of mastery and accomplishment from their experiences," Kloepfel said. "They also learn self-control and patience."

Eleven-year-old Richard Stamy, a member of the B&G Hustlers can attest to that.

"I've been in the 4-H program six years, and I've learned a lot of things," Stamy told *The Ledger*. "I've learned the importance of sharing with others, having respect for others and being open-minded. I've also learned how to conduct meetings, and that listening to meetings is very important – even if they are boring."

Stamy is one of many local 4-H members vying to go to the State Fair. Using information off the NASA Web site, he's preparing to do two projects in aerospace and photography – which is one of the most popular areas of interest this year, Kloepfel said.

Stamy said he's displayed at state before, and liked the experience, and he hopes to have the chance to do it again. This week he plans to put the finishing touches on the model jet he's building.

Four-H also offers youth opportunity for self-determination and learning, Kloepfel said.

"Believing that you have impact over life's events rather than passively submitting to the will and whims of others is self-determination," she said. "Young people must foster a personal sense of influence over their own lives, exercising their potential to become self-directing autonomous adults.

"And 4-H offers that through its leadership and public speaking programs, among other things."

Kloepfel added, "an engaged youth is one who is mindful of building relationships and connections in order to develop understanding, which gives them a higher degree of self-motivation and an inexhaustible capacity to create."

The face of 4-H has changed. It's not just about agriculture and rural living anymore.

"Opportunities abound," Kloepfel said. "And the more often youth are involved in youth development programs like 4-H, the more they and their communities benefit."

Proof of this is Audrain County's newly-appointed prosecuting attorney, Jacob Shella-barger, a product of 4-H, who had this to say about the program:

"Audrain County 4-H and its volunteer leaders shaped my life in many ways. I started in elementary school with a few market hogs and some other projects, all of which taught me about agriculture, working as a community and learning by doing. I learned that although I enjoyed ceramics, art was not one of my strengths. I learned that proper care for market hogs required considerably more work than taking care of a puppy. The 4-H fair each year encouraged me to be willing to meet new people and compete with them in a spirit of cooperation – like when a friend's steer got loose, parents and 4-H members came from all corners of the fairgrounds to help get it under control.

"It was inspiring to see so many supportive community members and business leaders at each year's 4-H fair auction, all giving of their time and resources to help other 4-H members have the experiences and fund their projects. I was inspired by leaders who gave of their time and energy, even when I was not as willing to do so. The

encouragement and skills development I received from Audrain County 4-H helped me grow and mature, and I continue to be reminded of 4-H's life lessons every day. Thanks for this opportunity."

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