Holle Shares Canine Passion with Four Paws 4-H

When asked how many dogs she has, Julie Holle would tell you she has too many, “I don’t repeat numbers...but it’s a houseful.” Yet, its clear she doesn’t mind all the canine companionship, a passion and joy she shares with the Boone County Four Paws 4-H club.

The Four Paws 4-H club is relatively new, but attracts youth from all over the county who share a passion for working with dogs. Holle works with the kids to provide them with opportunities to work with their dogs in various sports, from obedience to basic nose work.

“When I did 4-H as a kid, all we could do with our dogs was obedience,” said Holle. “Honestly, some of these kids just won’t be successful in obedience with their dogs for a while, so I like to give them a variety of opportunities to try out other sports so every kid can go to the fair and do something.”

Holle holds weekly dog classes for 4-H kids from around Boone County to attend. They have the opportunity to learn a variety of basic dog training and handling skills, like obedience; showmanship; agility; and nose work, which is where dogs are trained to alert their handlers to hidden food or other smells. 4-H members who wish to take more advanced classes with their dogs often move on to the Columbia Canine Sport Center (CCSC) to continue developing their skills.
“We are very fortunate in Boone County to have the Sport Center,” said Holle. “They have lots of resources, and the staff out there are very good to the kids. They get discount pricing on the classes they take.”

Holle loves to watch the kids flourish as they learn new skills and grow with their dogs.

“It’s really neat getting to watch kids come out of their shell and really find something they like in life,” said Holle. “I’ve had some kids come in with really skittish dogs and deaf dogs, and seen them make progress and have so much fun.”

Holle knows the power 4-H has to help kids grow and develop, as she herself was a 4-H member as a child growing up in Glenwood, Iowa. She first started working as a leader in 4-H programs in college, when she attended Northeast Missouri State University (now Truman State University) in Kirksville. Her chemistry professor got her started helping with the dog programs at the local 4-H club.

“I met my husband through dogs,” said Holle. “When I was helping out with 4-H in college, I lived in the dorms and didn’t have a dog of my own. I needed one to demonstrate things to the kids with, and Mike had an Irish Setter he let me borrow.”

4-H and dogs continued to be a family affair. Holle’s own daughter, Liz, 23, was involved in 4-H as a child. Holle says the 4-H program gave Liz the chance to try out different activities with dogs, eventually snowballing into a lifelong passion. Liz now works as a professional dog handler.

Holle does her share of dog handling herself, and competes in Earth Dog and Barn Hunt competitions with her dogs. Earth Dog competitions involve small breeds
entering underground tunnels to seek out caged rats strategically placed in the
tunnels. Similarly, in Barn Hunt competitions dogs of any size work a course, sniffing
out and alerting their handlers to the presence of rats hidden in the straw. Holle’s
direct experience with so many forms of canine sport help make her a
knowledgeable resource to Four Paws 4-H.

“We look for opportunities to make the club money through selling
concessions,” said Holle. “We’ve used the money to go to dog judging competitions
in Chicago, and next year we are planning to take a trip to Kentucky. The kids work
hard all year long to raise money to take a trip, and even help decide where we go. I
only ask that it’s educational.”

Holle and Four Paws 4-H welcome new members to their club, which meets
at 6 p.m. the third Thursday of each month at the Columbia Canine Sports Center.
Visit extension.missouri.edu for more information about the Boone County 4-H.