Elaine George, Hallsville 4-H Club Leader

There was a spark in her eyes and an ease in her tone when she addressed the eight-year-old whom had just come inside from feeding her pet lamb, “Bob.”

Before the youngster made it to the kitchen, she calmly went though a short checklist of duties the child should have accomplished when checking on Bob. Without a fuss, the kid listened intently and answered each question with a polite, “Yes, mam.”

“Great job,” she said, and they both smiled. These are the little moments she lives for.

Elaine George, 4-H Club Leader for Hallsville, Mo., allows her 4-H members to keep their animals on her farm with the strict understanding that the kids come care for their lambs, goats and sheep multiple times per day.

Everything is a learning experience in George’s eyes.

A lifelong 4-H member, George is a firm believer in the organization and has allowed it to become a priority in her life today. For 29 years, she has devoted herself to educating the youth of her community and empowering them to become leaders.

For the Love of the Kids

George’s father was the first to get her family involved with 4-H. She remembers showing cattle as a young girl at the local fairs and experiencing that sense of communal unity at an early age. “It’s such a good program that teaches good lessons for kids. There’s just such a great sense of family in 4-H that I haven’t found anywhere else, full of truly wonderful people.”

George leads the largest 4-H club in Boone County. With over 120 members ages 8-18, she oversees more than 30 club projects and leads two projects. It may seem like a lot to juggle, but to George, it is all worth it.

“I just love 4-H and everything it does. I love kids,” George said. “There are so many rewards, being a leader in 4-H and for the kids.”

Over 30 years ago, George stepped up to be the 4-H leader when her children were young members. As her daughter and two sons each grew out of the program, George stepped back from her role as a club leader yet remained passionately involved.

A couple years rolled by and Hallsville was again in need of another community member to volunteer for the role.
For George, the dilemma was simple. “They needed someone, so I stepped in. And I’d do it again if they needed a leader.”

Involvement with 4-H has never been a sacrifice for George. She grew up understanding and thriving off of her experience as a child and knows that the skills and knowledge infused into this program are blessings. Time is not an issue because the benefits far outweigh the work. For George, the work is part of the learning experience.

“I spend about 20 hours every week working on 4-H activities and planning,” she said. “Some of my friends have told me that I am an overachiever, always wanting to make sure our projects and our kids are doing the best they can, so I spend a lot of time on them. But I love kids. Some days it gets really hectic, but it’s all worth it because of the kids.”

The typical Hallsville 4-H club meeting sees an average attendance of 100 members, as well as a handful of parents and other residents of Hallsville. They meet once a month with, separate meetings times for each project, to discuss and vote on current business, preview upcoming projects and feature presentations by the young members.

Yes, 4-H meetings are quite the production, yet George says she rarely takes the reigns.

“The meetings are completely run by the kids,” she said. “They come early to set up the chairs, set out the sign in sheets and pencils, come up with the agenda and lead the meetings. They’re learning to be leaders all the time.”

**Styles of Learning**

It’s no secret that corralling over 120 kids would be a challenge, but educating, inspiring and maintaining their interests could be completely overwhelming for a single person. With that many young people in one room at one time, George says she’s given up on amusing them with games. Instead, they work on projects together.

The ticket, she says, is discovering how each child processes information. That’s what she has learned the most from her time as a 4-H leader.

“Each person has their own style – style of learning and leading,” George said. “I’ve learned that all children are different and are handled differently. We teach them leadership skills and how to handle differences, and even handling differences positively. They learn that sometimes they have to fail to succeed, and we don’t belittle them when they do.”

**Learn by Doing**
4-H is very much run with the mantra of learning by doing as kids are constantly practicing new skills in various combinations of the 30 club projects available in Hallsville. George heads two of these projects: ham curing and sheep.

During the first week of December, George provides 46 of her kids with the hands-on knowledge to cure hams. They prep the ham then, take off the cure mix in May and ready the products for the largest 4-H event of the year in July – The 4-H Fair. There, the kids display their cured hams for judging and the best ones are sold to buyers from across the state.

George says this is one of the most popular projects and allows the children to patiently watch a masterpiece develop from beginning to end.

Genuine caring for animals is a popular ideal in 4-H as George's Sheep Project is also the largest in the county. She assists 20 Hallsville kids in looking after their animals on a daily basis with meetings once per month. "We are instilling in them that they are caring for [their sheep]. You know, they need to feed them and take care of them or their animals die."

Kids also learn how to fundraise and serve the community with the Burger and Fry Night drive-thru. They help cook, prep and serve the food, how to count money and give change with the understanding that all proceeds benefit their peers. Each fundraiser brings in $1,500-1,800 toward 4-H camps, trips and the night's operating expenses. "The kids are working their tails off to help each other out."

George feels that life skills, traits and practices are best instilled while they are young. Her lessons can be seen blatantly in her projects as the kids experience the immediate results from their hard work – but her lessons are also in the details.

"I'm a stickler for records because, in the long run, you'll benefit from keeping them," she said. "I require my kids to keep a running calendar of all the responsibilities they have with all their activities, and even their final projects. It's a way they can visually see the work they're putting in, as well as help them when they're filling out applications for leadership positions or scholarships in the future."

George's previous members have raved to her that 4-H has helped them stand out in college classrooms and interviews due to her emphasis on public speaking. George ensures that her kids are no strangers to presenting in 4-H meetings.

"I like public speaking and think the kids get the most from it – and I don't believe in notes," she said. "Kids should be able to make presentations in front of their peers and community members without holding notecards. It helps them to really know the information."
Yes, George’s teaching styles are an experience for youth who are still growing and maturing. This is the endearing opportunity that she admits has taught her just as much about herself as it has allowed her to impart on the kids.

“When it comes to dealing with kids in general, I love it.”

**Community Contributions**

Besides running the largest club in the county, George has also created a great reputation in the 4-H community and in Hallsville.

Since 4-H created its annual Celebrity Pie Auction in conjunction with the 4-H BBQ every spring, George’s pies have consistently ruled as the top-selling pies. In 2014, her beautiful blackberry pie sold for a whopping $215.

“I go out and find sponsors to buy my pies every year because I know all the money goes back to the kids. So, the best way I figured I could raise more money was to find people to sponsor my pies for the auction. Just more money for the kids.”

It became apparent that ‘Service’ could possibly be George’s middle name as she casually enumerated her involvement outside 4-H. Along with contributing to several community service projects, she is the treasurer and board member for the Hallsville Fairgrounds, an Optimus member, the Boone County Fair Ham Breakfast and Ham Show leader and the Co-Coordinator for the Livestock Appreciation Dinner.

What do all of these activities have in common? They are opportunities for George to help others. It is a busy life, she says, but an enjoyable one.

**4-H for Life**

George and her husband Ray, her three children and seven grandchildren have all grown up with or are currently experiencing the benefits of the 4-H lifestyle. “Oh yes,” George said with a light laugh, “My family will be in 4-H forever. I have one great-grandchild who isn’t old enough yet to be a member, but I’m sure that will happen.”

To George, 4-H truly connects the youth to its community with so many wonderful learning activities that provide benefits long past their membership.

The 4-H life is hands-on and time-consuming just as much as it is rewarding and fun. This life is a simple one for George and she cannot picture it any better.

“I’m in my 29th year as a leader,” she said. “I’ll do it for as long as I can handle it.”
Elaine George, 4-H Club Leader for Hallsville, Mo., inspires young 4-H members to be well-rounded and skillful people in a family atmosphere.