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Lakes Region Community News

Sunday, May 6, 2007

Belnap County 4-H offers youth more than agriculture activities

By JUDITH BUSWELL
Special to the Citizen

Say "4-H" and anyone with more than a few strands of gray hair probably thinks farmer overalls, frilly aprons and county fairs.

"If so," says Rebecca Levesque, Belnap County 4-H Extension Educator, "then they just haven't met today's 4-H youth!"

"Yes, the green, four-leafed clover with an 'H' on each leaf is still very much with us," adds Levesque. She explains that the familiar logo represents the Head, Heart, Hands, and Health which is the core of a trusted framework for promoting leadership, citizenship and life skills in youth.

"However," she says, "what has changed is how they get there."

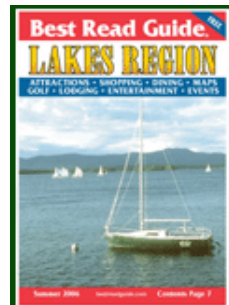
Many 4-H youths are involved in traditional activities with animals, livestock, fashion arts and nutrition, but, according to Lévesque, "they are also just as likely to be learning GPS mapping, rocketry, shooting sports, computer technology, public speaking, photography, theatre arts or money management."

The 4-H program began more than 100 years ago, in 1902, as a formal program for youths from rural and agricultural communities. A genuine American idea, the 4-H program was created to offer the same opportunities for



Courtesy Photo TREVOR HADLEY of the 4-H Afterschool Program in Alton holds a copy of the 4-H pledge he has learned as part of his 4-H experience: 'I pledge my HEAD to clearer thinking, my HEART to greater loyalty, my HANDS to larger service, and my HEALTH to better living for my club, my community, my country, and my world.'

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rural youths that were available to urban youths and to promote education in country schools and advance agricultural technology.

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Today, 4-H is one of the largest youth programs in America and engages youths from all demographics across the country in an array of positive activities that promote learning by doing.

Adds Levesque, "Right here in Belknap County, there are close to 300 youth[s] in 27 very active 4-H groups, all learning how to be independent and productive members of society."

While 4-H groups once were oriented to specific neighborhoods and met in backyards or around a kitchen table, today's groups are organized around special interests, community resources, home-school, school enrichment, after-school, summer camping, and at military installations. Partnerships in the community with other organizations and resources are fostered.

One such innovative group in Belknap County is the 4-H After School Program at the Alton Central School. More than 40 elementary and middle school youths meet one afternoon a week in the school's cafeteria and woodworking shop to learn from adult volunteers who teach them specific skills. The Alton youths spent the winter term learning woodworking, jewelry-making, fly-tying, knitting, quilting, and simple cooking projects.

As in all 4-H programs, there are no entry fees. Says Susan MacDuff who, along with her husband, Rick, leads the Alton after-school group, "Even though we meet in this school setting, we still have formal meetings where we do traditional 4-H activities such as reciting the Pledge of Allegiance and the 4-H Pledge."

A key component of 4-H is the active role that youths have in determining their own goals. They bring notebooks each week to track their progress on their projects of choice. One young man is bent over his project, head-to-head with his mentor, Faye LaCourse, who is teaching him how to tie flies for fishing. He works intently over a small, upright stand that sits on the cafeteria table, wrapping light fishing line around shiny lures and feathers while he is coached, step-by-step, through the process.

"I'm doing pretty good, right?" he asks her.

"Well, my yes, you are!" she replies as they work together to tighten the twine.

This same air of laughter and words of encouragement and support are readily obvious at all special-interest work stations. Says one young lady who was learning how to make jumble bracelets, "This is a lot better than sitting at home watching TV. We learn new stuff that we never did before."

The 4-H program, through the passage of the federal Smith-Lever Act in 1914, became part of the Cooperative Extension System which is supported through

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joint agreements among the U.S. Department of Agriculture, land-grant universities, state and local governments, and private partners. That unique partnership makes 4-H the only youth development program with direct access to technological advances from university research through its association with universities such as the University of New Hampshire.

"A huge incentive for these kids" says Susan MacDuff, "is that they can enter their projects in the annual 4-H County Fair."

Each August at the Belmont Fairgrounds, every participating youth receives achievement recognition awards and cash premiums for their varied accomplishments.

Further motivation comes from the festivals and competitions taking place in the county and at UNH where youths share their newly acquired skills and receive constructive comments from adults who participate as volunteer judges. A number of Belknap County youths have excelled in such festivals.

One example is 13-year-old Jeremiah Dadian, a home-schooled youth in Laconia who belongs to a family 4-H group that is led by his mother, Barbara. After completing 4-H training in public speaking, Jeremiah developed and presented a speech that captured first place in the Belknap County Regional Public Speaking contest. He then tied for first place in his age group at the statewide 4-H Public Speaking contest in Durham. In January, Jeremiah offered the same speech in front of more than 250 attendees at the Belknap County Convocation on Children and Families.

Emily Chase, a Belmont High School honor student and a longtime 4-H member, recently earned the right to attend a national 4-H event because of the high-quality personal resume and portfolio she assembled after some coaching on resume skills by a 4-H volunteer.

By using 4-H projects as important vehicles for achievement and growth, 4-H youths are able to build life skills they can use throughout their lives. 4-H projects intentionally incorporate opportunities to build self-esteem, learn good communication and decision-making skills, and accept constructive feedback.

According to retired Belmont educator, Melissa Atherton, "I can always tell which teens have been in 4-H. They are self-confident, they ask questions, and they aren't offended if they receive some constructive criticism. They learn and practice many life skills in the 4-H program."

"4-H is open to anyone and everyone," said Rebecca Levesque, explaining that the long-standing and high-quality youth development program "yields high-quality graduates."

She cites 4-H alumni such as former Vice-President Al Gore, Roy Rogers, Alan Shepherd, David Letterman, Julia Roberts, Sissy Spacek, and Jim Davis, creator of the Garfield comic strip, as several examples.

For more information, contact Becky Levesque at 527-5475.

This article is part of a series focusing on youth development organizations that provide a variety of positive growth experiences for young people in the Lakes Region. These articles and photos are provided to The Citizen by Judith Buswell, Resources and Planning Coordinator for the Belknap County Citizens Council on Children and Families, a County Department promoting Community Justice throughout Belknap County so that children and families can live safely with dignity and respect.



Courtesy Photo HAILEY VARNUM of Laconia, a new 4-H member, shares a piece of the banana bread she has made as part of the Belknap County Food Festival held in February.



Courtesy Photo MONTGOMERY TORGERSON of Alton is learning the art of fly-tying as part of his participation in the Winnepesaukee Winners 4-H Afterschool program in Alton.



Courtesy Photo AMANDA VISCARIELLO, right, learns the difference between knit and pearl from her adult mentor, Jeanita Alfonso, as

**part of the Winnepesaukee Winners 4-H
Afterschool program in Alton.**

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