

Why 4-H?

By Kathleen Jablonski, 4-H Youth Development Extension Educator

It's fair time. For most of you, that means going on some rides, eating "fair food", catching an ox pull or some great entertainment, supporting the games at the carnival and playing Bingo to support a local charitable organization. You might walk through the barns and get your annual fix of agriculture in action.

For me, it's an event 4-H'ers wait for every year: a chance to show off their projects, meet new friends and educate the public about 4-H.

Agricultural related projects are only one aspect of 4-H. They have been around since 4-H started in 1902 as a way to bring the research of the land grant university to the people of the state. Animal projects are carried on as a strong tradition in Grafton County.

When you walk into the dairy cattle barn or the sheep and goat tent, you see a bunch of kids running around with rakes and funky footwear cleaning up behind their animals. Or, you see 4-H'ers moving wheelbarrow loads of sawdust. As show day approaches, you see clippers being used and special attention being paid to the "topline" of the cow or the way the wool sets on the side of the ewe. You see goats getting milked or walked through a pack animal course to practice. You see dogs being walked and groomed before their show. You see some smiles, you see some tears, you hear an adult make a reminder and see a smile or a shrug as that 4-H'er goes off to do as requested.

What you don't see is why they are in 4-H. I spent some time this week asking our 4-H exhibitors, and their parents, why they chose 4-H over another youth organization.

Thursday, I literally walked around the animal exhibit areas at the North Haverhill Fair and asked the kids, "Why 4-H?" They gave me the look kids usually give me, but then I pressed them for answers. "I'm doing an article for tomorrow", I said, "why is 4-H important." Then, they'd grin, and tell me.

Piper Sherbert, 10, is brand new to showing dairy goats. She told me, "It's fun in the summer. I wanted to get some goats and get started."

She went on to tell me she and her sister, Darby, attended a goat clinic a few weeks ago to learn all they could about showing. When I asked what was one thing she learned, her reply came: "You have to be careful with goats to tell if they're hurt or not"

Travis Cooke and Jacob Dalton, both age 16, show goats and sheep respectively. Why 4-H for them? Jacob's answer was "It's awesome." Travis went on to say, "It's fun. It provides you with some great opportunities and you get to meet new people."

Then I asked the hard question: What have you learned through 4-H that you wouldn't have learned in another experience? That gave them some pause. Jacob, after a couple of moments, said, "It's hard to say...it does help teach responsibility. It gives you tools to improve yourself." Travis added to the comments. "It gives you more life experiences. You learn things other people (peers) don't learn. You learn responsibility for your animals...and yourself."

Moving down the tent, I caught Catherine Kondi working with her goats. She got the same question. “It helps you interact with others. You learn new things. It helps you with everything. It covers it all...and makes you seem smarter at school. It’s the little things you learn that help you in life.”

All the 4-H’ers shared Aiden Cleaves’, 15, and Will Patch’s, 14, comments about meeting new friends and getting together with them several times a year at shows. They know these are lifelong friends. But, why 4-H?

“We educate the public about agriculture and the good things. I think the public believes us more than adults because we know our animals and the answers to their questions,” Aiden shared. Will nodded as he spoke. Both live on and help with the family dairy farms. Will went on to say, “You learn to work with animals and how to manage their behavior.”

Ron Senecal, age 8, and first year showman told me to the “Why 4-H?” question, “I just do it. I get a premium. It’s better for me because of the cows.”

His mother, Holly Senecal, shared with me it’s helping his ability to work with a group, to learn to manage his own behavior and to be responsible.

Helen Mae Metcalf, 16, feels 4-H “taught me to be a respectable person” as well as all of the animal science she needs to know to care for and show her cows. And, with a big grin, “I know how to wash a cow.”

Brooke Clark and sister Lindsay show dairy cattle. The sisters agreed they’ve made friends, learned how to work together and how to work hard. Brooke said she didn’t quite know how to say it. “You always have the same connections...these are people who think like me,” referring to values and ethics of the kids around her in the barn.

Doreen Morris, 4-H alumni, mother of two 4-H alumni and one current member, was put on the spot when I asked, “What would be your 30 second elevator speech to someone about the value of 4-H?”

She sums it up nicely for the end of this article:

“The value of 4-H is they learn life skills, they learn how to work hard and be responsible for themselves and others. They educate the public about agriculture. They learn and teach about dairy farming and working steers (and other projects). If there wasn’t 4-H, the public wouldn’t be aware of farming.”

So, that’s “Why 4-H?”

For more information about Grafton County’s 4-H Youth Development program contact us at 603-787-6944 or email: grafton@ceunh.unh.edu.

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