

Cows, goats, and a whole lot more

4-H offers kids a big world of opportunities



By Charles Johnson

Photo: Livia Daentl gets one of her 4-H projects ready for showtime at the Wisconsin State Fair.

The smile dancing across her face is the best measure of what 4-H means to 18-year-old Livia Daentl. At the moment, she's preparing a cow for the state fair, but she's long been active in her Iowa County, Wis., club, and rattles off her projects machine-gun style: photography, environmental issues, child development, baking, foods, nutrition, rabbits, arts and crafts. And, this being Wisconsin, dairy cattle, of course.

"I love 4-H, really love it. I'm so glad I got into it when I was young," Livia says.

"Things like going to the state fair are fun but they're such a small detail of 4-H now. It's really a consumer-service organization. It lets kids get involved in so many things. I've enjoyed the trips, too. I've been to Washington, D.C., Chicago, and St. Louis, thanks to 4-H."

Today's 4-H clubs differ quite a bit from those of a generation ago, though the group



Top: A 4-H tradition, clothing projects get top billing at county fairs. **Above:** Dan Bandyk, Mineral Point, Wis., prepared a 4-H entomology display.

remains firmly attached to its 1902 roots. Members now focus on science, engineering, technology, leadership, wellness, and citizenship projects in addition to the animal projects 4-H was once known for. About 1.6 million youth belong to more than 89,000 4-H clubs. In addition, more than 7 million youngsters participate in 4-H at some level, 4 million through school enrichment groups, and about 300,000 through 4-H camps.

Only 10% of the 4-H members now live on full-time farms. A quarter live in towns with populations of more than 50,000.

“Our mandate is to serve America’s youngest citizens. Early in our history, it was a farm-kid thing. Now that the greatest number of people are in suburban and urban areas, we have grown there with them,” says Cathann Kress, national director at 4-H headquarters.



4-H remains a part of USDA’s Extension Service, which makes land-grant university research available to the public.

Visit 16-year-old Clare Wiesbrook on her family’s small farm outside Mineral Point, Wis., and you see several 4-H principles at work. She’s been involved in more than a dozen 4-H projects ranging from clothing to art to leadership, but it’s goats that get most of her attention these days.

She milks 16 Alpine and Nubian dairy goats, then makes goats’ milk soap which she sells at a local farmers’ market. That means she not only learns about taking care of animals but about business, as well, keeping extensive records on costs and income. Through trial and error, she learned what works and doesn’t. Goats’ milk fudge and hand lotion both flopped, for example.

Above: Clare Wiesbrook works with some Boer meat goats. She used milk from her Alpine and Nubian dairy goats to start a soap-making business venture. **Right:** The 4-H photography entries in Minnesota’s Dakota County Fair competition show both creativity and skill.

“Now she takes goats to shows and she’s gotten very good at working with the public,” says her mother, Cathy Wiesbrook. “She lets the public milk the goats at a local dairy breakfast and is in the 4th of July parade. The connections she’s made are amazing.”

Joe Solinger, a high school senior and president of the Dakota County, Minn., 4-H Federation, says, “4-H really opened me up. In fifth grade I went to a leadership retreat and something clicked. It was awesome. I started signing up for everything I could.”

Solinger says 4-H became a big part of his





Above: One of Clare Wiesbrook's curious dairy goats gets ready for milking time.



Top: Wilcox County, Ga., 4-Hers organized an effort to send boiled peanuts to military personnel in Iraq. **Above:** 4-H members in Dakota County, Minn., get ready to show their horses in spirited competition.

life despite the fact that his family lives on a small acreage. “4-H opened up my world so much,” he says. “I’ll always be grateful.”

The breadth of 4-H activities is virtually unlimited. Idaho 4-Hers run “Snow Camp,” teaching winter survival skills. Tracy, Calif., 4-Hers put their own comedy show, “Not Just the News,” on local TV. Illinois 4-Hers organize an annual one-day event to familiarize youngsters with the state lawmaking process.

The Salmon 4-H Model Horse Club in Idaho worked to convince Breyer Animal Creations to make and sell a model horse with profits going to save endangered Abaco Barb horses on an island in the Bahamas. In

Sonoma County, Calif., 4-Hers used a start-up \$5,000 donation from musician Carlos Santana to form a drum and dance ensemble that helps them learn about other cultures. They’ve since performed across the country.

“4-H helps create well-rounded individuals. These are lifelong skills they’re learning, not high-school skills,” says Mary Staszak, whose daughters Jessica and Elizabeth have been active in clubs in Dakota County, Minn.

Community service remains important to 4-H. Many clubs across the nation organized fund raisers to help house, feed, and clothe victims of Hurricane Katrina. Some have put together support programs for children of military personnel serving in Iraq.

When a soldier in Iraq wrote home to Wilcox County, Ga., saying he craved that region’s famous boiled peanuts, 4-Hers arranged to send packs of the delicacy so each of the 4,300 members of his brigade got enough for a tasty snack.

That’s just one example of the group’s community service, says Suzanne Keene, Wilcox County Extension program assistant for nine years. “There are just lots and lots of service projects we do. 4-H teaches children to be self-sufficient, productive members of society. It’s fun but we try to throw a learning curve in there when the kids are not looking. We aim to make the best better, to help them learn by doing,” she says. **H**

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—Joe Solinger