



FROM PASTURE TO PLATE

4-H kids learn to nurture livestock

BY ALEXIA POHL GAWLAK

In a world where computers keep many teenagers tethered to a brave new global network, Central Florida 4-H teens are connecting with an ancient tradition—animal husbandry. Knowing they can have a major impact on the healthful living of future generations, members of 4-H livestock clubs are stepping up to nurture animals from pasture to plate.

Club members will showcase their livestock at the annual Central Florida Fair in Orlando through March 6. As members prepare to take the animals they've raised to auction, consumers look forward to placing bids on well-tended livestock.

"This is a different experience for people because they are buying their own meat. It is a very intimate experience," says Rebecca Harris, a University of Florida extension faculty member in charge of the Orange County 4-H and its youth skills life development program. "We want people to understand that not only are they getting quality meat, but they can interact with the producer, the youth, and find out about the purchase they are making. The buyer can go and talk right to the youth and find out 'What have you done with this animal?' 'How have you raised it?'"

The Youth Market Livestock Auction takes place annually on the final Sunday

of the Fair (March 6 this year), but 4-H Club members spend months preparing for it. According to Stacey Redditt, the fair's livestock and educational manager, kids who bring steers to auction generally purchase them the summer before. They are responsible for everything related to the animal's care and wellbeing and must log their experiences in a record book provided by the club. This journal contains space for photos and essays, as well as worksheets to help them track expenses, profit and loss. Says Redditt: "These kids don't just have an animal in the backyard that they throw feed to every day. It's a business."

4-H livestock club members also learn that part of their business is ethics. The program aims to instill in them the sense that responsible animal husbandry leads to a better quality end product. Each of the program's participants goes through an ethics training program that must be repeated every three years. "There is absolutely zero tolerance for any abuse, any [mistreatment of] animals," says Redditt.

Every 4-H meeting begins with a pledge meant to encourage participants ages 5 to 18 to nurture their Head, Heart, Hands and Health in preparation for becoming productive citizens. UF's Harris

says members are on "a pathway to influence future generations. We try to stress that 4-H is for everyone."

Harris and Redditt have seen a considerable rise in participation in this year's Youth Livestock Auction, meaning that past participants are returning, and new interest is increasing. Harris is passionate about her role in working with these future local food leaders.

"I do it because I really believe that I am making the world a better place," she says. "I am working with people who are working with kids that are turning out an amazing product." 🍌

For more information about the Orange County 4-H clubs, contact Rebecca Harris, Extension Faculty, 4-H Youth Development at (407) 254-9205 or rlharris@ufl.edu.

For more information about the UF Orange County Education Extension and the programs it offers, contact the Extension directly at (407) 254-9200 or www.solutionsforyourlife.com.

For more information about the Central Florida Fair's livestock programs, youth or otherwise, contact Stacey Redditt, Livestock and Educational Manager at (407) 295-3247 or Stacey@centralfloridafair.com.

Photo: Stephen Grasso