

Friendships Key to 4-H Success

By Kelly Ann Radzik, Extension Educator

October is the "worst of times" and the "best of times" for the 4-H program. It's the worst because all of the angst that accompanies the required end-of-year paperwork. Member project records and volunteer reports are due, not to mention all of the forms for the new year. If you are acquainted with anyone involved with 4-H, you know that pretty much any of us would much rather be out doing an activity than filling out forms. . . .

But the October paperwork onslaught also highlights "the best." Members are challenged to show us in writing what they learned during the year. And every year, the adults involved are amazed and touched by what is written. This year, it seemed like everyone had the same theme: they couldn't have made it all happen without "a little help from their friends."

One member, Lindsay, wrote about how she was nervous to be the youngest member qualified to participate in the Master Showmanship contest and how last year's winner became a friend and gave her hints, helping her to prepare for the event. Another member, Justine, wrote about how she, her cousin and a friend were determined to do well in the Herdsmanship contest at the Fair. The three girls formed a partnership and devised a strategy--which included daily coordinated teamwork at 5:00 AM--that helped them consistently earn top honors.

I think sixth-year member Micaela Cacciatore probably tells it best, as she had the most striking example of needing a helping hand. She was nervous about showing her cow Mae, who had been giving her a hard time before fair. She even had a nightmare about it, the night before the show. Here's her story:

"As I led Mae through the crowded walkway to the show ring, my stomach was swarming with butterflies. Mae was really antsy and was head butting me. I was the last to enter the show ring and I felt like the smallest. I was so nervous. Then my dream came alive. Mae started to drag me to the opposite end of the show ring. She was almost pulling my arm out trying to get out of the enclosed area. Every time I was pushed to the side where my mom stood, she asked if I wanted to take Mae out of the ring. I wanted to fight Mae a little longer though. She finally got too out of hand and I was bumping into the other exhibitors. That's when a friend and experienced showman came to my aid. He grabbed my show halter and calmed Mae down. He continued to walk her around the ring. Since my heifer acted so poorly, I wasn't able to make her look good for the judge, but my friend was [able to show her well]. Mae placed third out of five."

"After the show, my arms were tired and I was drenched in sweat. I gratefully thanked my friend who had helped me. As I walked back to barn, I tried to figure out why Mae was so pushy and uncooperative. I came to the conclusion that is because she is such a big animal. She knows that she is bigger than I, so she knows she can push me around. This experience helped me learn that sometimes you need to get help from someone with more experience."

Micaela's lesson was a good reminder to us all: we can always do and learn more when we work as a team. And in 4-H, many times it is a team of youth teaching youth that is the most effective and supportive.

Of course, the bottom line with friendship is that kids want to be around other kids and enjoy each other's company. As third-year member Patrick wrote, "My favorite part of 4-H is making new friends and hanging out with my old friends. I like showing with people who also like animals, and I meet a lot of really nice people through 4-H."