

## 4-H leadership program introduces teens to their community

By Carol Lea Spence



SPRINGFIELD, Ky., (Oct. 4, 2017) — Granted, it wasn't a perfect day to visit a dairy farm. A constant hard drizzle managed to stir up a sloppy mess of mud. Not one of the 21 teenagers complained, because hugging and bottle-feeding two-day-old calves trumps mud any day. Moving on to the next stop of the day, they fed hunks of carrots to big-eyed alpacas at Serano Alpaca Farm and ended the morning's tour at the home of local folk artist Norma Jean Campbell.

It was all part of Teen Leadership Washington County's Agriculture Day, one of the monthly activities in which member high school students learn about career options and service opportunities in their home county.

"Anyone here want to be a dairy farmer?" asked Billy Riney, owner of Riney Dairy. Silence.

"Anyone want to work on a dairy farm?"

No one did.

No surprise there. Help is hard to come by, he told the students, informing them of one of the many concerns that fill a business owner's day.

Those are the types of lessons the leadership program teaches. Led by Roberta Hunt, 4-H youth development extension agent in Washington County, and Tina Sagrecy, director of Washington County Schools' College and Career Readiness and Community Service Center, the program is now in its 15<sup>th</sup> year. It sprang from Leadership Washington County, an adult program that is designed to introduce people to the workings of their community. Members of that group thought something similar would be useful for area youth.

This year's class is made up of 21 juniors from Washington County High School, all of whom applied for the program during their sophomore year. They meet monthly, beginning with an orientation in July and a retreat in August. Agriculture Day was the first of many daylong activities focused on one segment of the community. Other examples include Law and Justice Day, Health and Emergency Services Day and State Government Day.

Hunt said this program prepares them to be better citizens and have more successful lives.

"They may not see the results now, but years to come they'll feel the benefit," she said. "They are not only introduced to how businesses and government run in the county, but they learn through community service that a successful community depends on the input of all its citizens."

At Serano, Ron and Judi Allread explained how they care for their alpacas and showed the students how they created high-value-added clothing and accessories from the animals' fleece.

The program is about more than just touring. For August's retreat, participants were tasked with creating a PowerPoint presentation from photographs they took around Washington County, identifying the good and the less sublime parts of the area. They also have to engage in a civic organization for the year, which might include joining something like the Rotary Club or regularly attending meetings of the airport or economic development boards.

Many of the students are looking forward to college in two years and believe participating in the leadership program will help them get into their first pick of schools. And many, like 16-year-old Andrea Clements, weren't completely sure what they were getting into.

"I didn't really know what it would be like, but I just wanted to see what I could do for my community in the future and right now," she said.

Teen Leadership Washington County is only one example of the many opportunities in 4-H for young people to develop leadership skills that will stand them in good stead throughout their lives.

“Kentucky 4-H strives to empower youth at the beginning, intermediate and advanced levels of their 4-H career to become positive leaders through hands-on communication, teamwork, mentoring and civic engagement opportunities,” said Rachel Noble, University of Kentucky extension specialist for 4-H youth development. “Our goal as an organization is to provide a seamless pipeline into college or a career after high school, by providing high quality leadership opportunities where we equip youth with the skills necessary to be contributors in their chosen path.”

Those paths can be as diverse and as varied as the imagination can conjure. In Norma Jean Campbell’s 200-year-old house and two outside studios, imagination has no limits. It is filled to the rafters with dolls, ornaments, pottery and hand-woven table runners she’s created, all from natural or found objects.

Campbell not only spins yarn, though, she spins yarns, keeping the teens entertained with stories about the many needle-felted dolls she has made. There’s a tableau she’s built with a witch and a bird house, and the tale she told about a blue bird and the witch was as intricate as the work she put into the piece.

Sagrecy said the group will touch on many unique fields throughout the year.

“What they gain the most, probably, is figuring out what area they really want to go into. We’re opening their eyes to things they never even thought of,” she said.

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