

Jefferson Rotary learns about 4-H

By Pam Chickering Wilson Union staff writer | Posted: Thursday, March 12, 2015 9:01 am

JEFFERSON — When the Jefferson Rotary Club welcomes its speaker for the club’s weekly lunch meetings, the person at the podium usually isn’t 8 years old.

However, that’s just what happened on Wednesday, when third-grader Connor Price, a member of the Sullivan Stars 4-H Club, reprised his Award of Excellence-winning speech on his 4-H experience.

Price joined Sarah Torbert, University of Wisconsin-Extension Jefferson County Youth Development/4-H agent, who started off the presentation on the 100-year-history of 4-H and its impact in Jefferson County today.

Torbert took over as the county 4-H agent last year. A native of Jefferson County, she worked for 4-H in Missouri for a decade before returning to the area where she grew up and started her 4-H journey.

Jefferson County celebrated 4-H’s century milestone with a special recognition during the 2014 Jefferson County Fair. The idea of 4-H has a shared history of the University of Wisconsin-Extension, which brings the best ideas from current university research to regular citizens for use in their everyday lives, Torbert said.

Nationally, the Smith Lever Act of 1914 funded and codified into federal law land grant universities, with one Extension agent serving all areas. Now there are multiple Extension agents in each county, of which the 4-H/youth development agent is one.

But those who initially implemented these Extension programs found most adults to be reluctant to try out new, research-based planting or canning methods. So they started working with youth instead, establishing Corn Clubs and Canning Clubs.

Young men in corn clubs, for example, were given new hybrid corn to plant in plots alongside their fathers’ traditional crops, and more often than not, the more disease-resistant hybrid corn outperformed the traditional plots.

Meanwhile, while adult women continued canning in the same way as their mothers and grandmothers had taught



PAST AND PRESENT OF 4-H

PAST AND PRESENT OF 4-H — The Jefferson Rotary Club on Wednesday heard from Sarah Torbert, University of Wisconsin-Extension Jefferson County’s Youth Development/4-H agent, who talked about the 100-year history of 4-H and how it has changed. She was joined by Connor Price, 8, Sullivan, a member of the Sullivan Stars 4-H Club and an “Award of Excellence” winner in the county 4-H program’s recent Special Emphasis speech contest, who spoke about his own experience with 4-H and how he had grown, building friendships and memories as he develops his skills through the program. Above Ron Michaelis, Jefferson Rotary Club president, center, presents Price and Torbert with Rotary Club mugs. — Daily Union photo by Pam Chickering Wilson.

them, young girls in canning clubs were taught new, scientifically tested methods to avoid contamination and botulism.

Torbert showed a photo of 4-H members from early in the program holding up signs proclaiming their involvement in the Tomato, Bee, Pig and Corn clubs.

By 1923, there were 96 4-H clubs in Jefferson county, but each of those were project-specific, so they can't be compared to today's 29 Jefferson County 4-H clubs, which are mainly community-centered.

Of the existing clubs, only the Hebron Helping Hands dates back to 1923, but several others in the county have been in existence since 1935. Those include the Sullivan Stars and the Farmington All-Stars, which is the county's largest club with around 100 members.

Throughout Jefferson County, 729 youth are enrolled in 4-H, with 262 of those coming from farms, 332 living in rural areas or small towns with populations under 10,000, and the rest coming from cities with populations exceeding 10,000.

Meanwhile, 301 adult leaders — including club leaders and project leaders — volunteer to work with the youth.

“We serve a wide variety of people,” Torbert said.

Now, 4-H caters to a much wider range of interests and career paths as well. Many people participate in the traditional agricultural projects such as dairy or beef animals, but many of the most popular projects are not agriculture-related at all.

The top 10 list of projects in which Jefferson County 4-Hers participate today includes photography (311 people), arts and crafts (282 participants), foods (190), archery (183), poultry (153), swine (145), horses (131) and woodworking (123.)

The county's shooting sports program, including archery, rifle shooting and muzzleloading, really is growing, Torbert said, as is the robotics program, which competed in its first Lego League competition this year.

The overall focus of 4-H has changed, Torbert said, emphasizing broader personal, skill and career development.

Through hands-on experience in areas of interest and working with adult and older youth mentors, 4-Hers develop a sense of belonging, learn mastery of their chosen skills, learn independence and responsibility, and through service projects, they develop their generosity as well.

Some of the opportunities Jefferson County 4-H youth participate in include: Washington D.C. Focus, a statewide conference in Madison, overseas exchanges such as the one in which Johnson Creek student Erin Walsh participated in Japan last summer, 4-H Camp at Upham Woods in Wisconsin Dells and more.

At the club level, members hear educational speakers, do community service projects, enjoy social and recreational events, and fundraise, Torbert said.

Fair exhibits — the result of a 4-Her's year-long work within their chosen projects — range widely, from model rockets to fishing journals to showing animals and performing live music or dance and much, much more.

Additional opportunities at the county level throughout the year include the Junior Leaders, for seventh-graders on

up; Project Learning Day, with numerous mini-classes and crafts for 4-Hers to make; the annual speech and poster contest, county-level project activities and meetings, and the annual awards banquet.

There are a lot of ways to help the county 4-H program: through donations to the endowment fund, for special purposes or toward the general fund, by donating supplies or materials, and through the donation of time as a project leader, as a guest speaker or by volunteering at a specific event, Torbert said.

Price took the podium after Torbert and, despite his youth, delivered an earnest and personal reflection on his short history with 4-H.

He said that when he started as a Cloverbud (kindergarten through second-grade level), he wondered whether he'd make friends, and he found that he made a lot of them.

He said he particularly enjoyed attending monthly robotics meetings on the county level and when he became a regular 4-Her this year, he decided to sign up for the project.

He took four entries to the fair last year, a metal detector robot, a metal model of a spider, a bathhouse, and a model of "a day at the lake."

In August, Price went to Cloverbud Day Camp and he loved it. The Junior Leaders ran the camp at Jefferson's Riverfront Park, and last year's camp had a circus theme.

But his favorite part? The pizza lunch!

At monthly 4-H meetings, Price said, he learned how 4-H works, kept up on current projects, did crafts and gave his first demonstration for the club, on how to make a birdseed snack.

Last year, Price entered the 4-H poster and speech contest, with the theme of careers. He made a poster about how his 4-H experience would help him become an archaeologist one day.

As a third-grader, Price became a full-fledged 4-Her this year and he already has enjoyed exploring his areas of interest more deeply.

This year at Project Learning Day, he said, he studied model rockets, learned to make a deerskin pouch, discovered what owls eat and found out he eats rocks in the form of salt.

He also made new friends, "even if I can't remember their names," he said.

In the dog project this year, he's learning responsibility and patience, while in robotics he's getting lots of technology expertise in "how to build and test robots."

Price said he plans to attend the regular 4-H camp this year at Wisconsin Dells, involving hiking, canoeing and crafts.

"My sister liked it," he said. "I think I will, too."

He said he wondered what his 4-H future held, guessing that he might become more involved as a club officer, perhaps go on some trips and maybe even become a camp counselor. Whatever was involved, Price told the Rotarians, he is ready and excited about the possibility.