

Jefferson County 4-H/youth agent Torbert takes state job in Wyoming

By Pam Chickering Wilson pchickering@gmail.com | Posted: Monday, April 11, 2016 8:43 am

JEFFERSON — Since Sarah Torbert took over as Jefferson County 4-H/youth development agent in 2013, the 4-H program has modernized its recordkeeping and training systems. But the biggest goal Torbert has brought to her job is the vision of 4-H projects as a year-round learning experience, not limited to creating and preparing fair entries.

In May, Torbert will be leaving Jefferson County to take on a statewide 4-H position in Wyoming, but many of the changes implemented during her time will remain in place.

Although the Wisconsin state 4-H program is facing some cuts in the coming years, Torbert said she believes the county University of Wisconsin-Extension office will be hiring a replacement for her after the usual process of advertising the vacancy and interviewing candidates.

Torbert has worked as one of four agents at the Jefferson County UW-Extension office, along with Lavern Georgson, ag agent; Kathleen Eisenmann, family living agent, and Steve Grabow, community development agent.

Originally from Watertown, Torbert belonged to the Lucky Clovers 4-H Club while growing up and she took every opportunity that 4-H offered to learn and expand her horizons. She served as a 4-H intern for more than one county in Wisconsin, worked at the National 4-H Center in Washington D.C. and resided in Finland for six months in 2011 as part of an international 4-H exchange.

Before returning to her home state in 2013, Torbert worked as a 4-H agent in Missouri.



Sarah Torbert

Torbert said she started as Jefferson County 4-H agent right at the same time as Wisconsin revamped its enrollment system at the state level and a lot of recordkeeping that had been done by hand moved online.

Online enrollment and camp registration were just one part of the modernization in Jefferson County 4-H, which also has increased its social media presence greatly in the last few years, with an active Facebook page, Twitter feed and a new Pintarest page.

Torbert said her main goal for Jefferson County 4-H during her years here has been to focus on the overall educational experience.

“The fair is not an end result — it’s just one of the things we do,” she said.

She said members should be investigating their various project areas throughout the year, as well as participating in service, general educational opportunities and social events.

During Torbert’s time here, the county robotics program has expanded and flourished, and a new Lego project has started. She credited parents with being the major motivators behind these programs and said they will continue after she leaves, thanks to these dedicated volunteers.

The county also revised 4-H recordbook requirements to make them more goal-focused, she said.

Leader training has become more coordinated, and project committees have become more active.

Torbert said the Jefferson County area has a strong 4-H tradition, and opportunities are expanding.

“4-H is now so much more than what our parents and grandparents had exposure to,” she said.

“There are so many options.”

One of the misconceptions about 4-H is that it’s a program only for rural youth, people who live on farms and raise crops or animals. In fact, non-farm youth also are welcome to join, whether they pursue more traditional activities such as quilting, pickling and raising animals or less-traditional activities such as computers, photography, rocketry and robotics.

She said another way 4-H is different is that it involves the entire family. Youngsters of all ages are in the same club, breaking out into areas of interest, and there are lots of opportunities for involvement and leadership for parents and older youth.

Although proposed statewide cuts to the 4-H program and the University of Wisconsin Extension system as a whole have caused some concerns among participants and employees, Torbert said, the coming budget-tightening was not a major factor in her decision to move to another state.

“Budget cuts are definitely coming, but things are up in the air right now as to what that’s actually going to look like,” Torbert said.

She predicted that counties would be cooperating more on things like volunteer and officer training, and more things might be more centrally located or developed across the state. County 4-H programs certainly will be looking for ways to work more efficiently while continuing to serve young members and their families, she said.

She said she was not actively seeking a new job; rather, she received an alert of the Wyoming opening due to a convention she had attended.

“The opportunity just came up,” she said. “My husband and I talked about it and we felt it was a good move.”

Torbert will be serving as the volunteer management specialist for the Wyoming 4-H program. It’s similar to what she has done in Jefferson County, but on a larger scale.

“I’ll be working with staff and volunteers on a state level to help them work better with young people, doing training, sharing the general principals of 4-H, helping to troubleshoot when there are issues, and growing the program overall.

She’ll also help with the state fair and state competitions.

Although she will be serving the entire state, Wyoming does not have nearly as big a 4-H program as Wisconsin.

“Only 550,000 people live in Wyoming — that’s roughly the population of Milwaukee,” Torbert noted. “They have six people in their state office, as opposed to the 15 to 20 we have in Wisconsin.”

Torbert said she is excited about the new opportunity.

“I get to specialize in something that’s important to me: volunteer development.”

Coincidentally, Torbert will enter her Wyoming job already knowing one of the officials there.

“The lady who had the job prior to me was from Wisconsin, too. I’d actually interned under her in St. Croix County a number of years ago,” Torbert said. “She moved up in the organization, so the job opened up.”

Torbert said she will be leaving with wonderful memories of Jefferson County.

“This has been my dream job,” Torbert said of her role as Jefferson County 4-H agent. “It’s what I’ve wanted to do ever since I was a kid. I never looked any further than this, but sometimes we have to take the opportunities that present themselves.”

Torbert said she’ll have a couple of months to wrap things up in Jefferson County and make sure existing staff members are able to take over various parts of the job until the county is able to hire a permanent replacement.

“We are fully staffed right now, which helps,” she said “We recently hired a new administrative assistant, and our summer intern starts May 16.”

Meanwhile, existing staffers Kim Buchholz and Lindsey Schreiner will help to pick up some of Torbert’s other responsibilities.

Torbert said the local leaders’ association will probably step up as well to send out reminders about upcoming events.

In the meantime, the county has scheduled a farewell open house for Torbert, which will take place from 3:30-6:30 p.m. Monday, May 9, at the UW-Extension office in Jefferson.