HOME AND GARDEN COLUMN

4-H PROGRAM

(This article is submitted by Tania Cook, a University of Florida student intern working at the University of Florida/IFAS Osceola County Extension Office. She hopes to become a 4-H agent and work with youth and adults.)

Summer is ending with the new school year just around the corner. The fun for most will decrease greatly then but what if the adventure could last all year?

Osceola County, like many other counties, has the opportunity to carry on a 100-year-old educational tool. The tool, 4-H, was begun to help youth become self-directed, productive and contributing members of society. The primary focus of 4-H dealt with agriculture in the past but today other occupations, activities and events exist. With the development of society, 4-H programs have changed and expanded. The state 4-H program is coordinated by the University of Florida.

4-H provides youth the opportunity to be involved in a positive educational environment while they strengthen their skills and experience teamwork, leadership, and citizenship through club and community activities. There are more than 40 programs that range from aerospace to zoology. Many projects completed during the year can even be seen at the county fair. 4-Hers also have the ability to compete in some district and state events, which provides members the chance to travel within and out of the state of Florida.

Summer camp is another exciting experience that takes place every year at Camp Ocala in the Ocala National Forest. At camp, older teens serve in leadership roles as counselors and class instructors. Some activities that took place this summer included swimming, canoeing, dancing, paint ball, volleyball, arts and crafts, etc. All campers also had chores throughout the week at camp, such as washing dishes, and were responsible for cleaning their own cabins, thus strengthening life skills.

The fun is not only for kids though. Adult volunteers stay young as they share their passions, hobbies and love with local youth. Volunteers also assist by chaperoning, sponsoring, and judging events and activities, as well as organizing clubs. Sometimes they get involved in 4-H because they were in 4-H as they grew up. Some discover the fun activities through their children's friends. Others have an internal desire to help our youth have good, positive educational experiences in troubled times. Youth volunteers build skills in organization and child development as they plan activities for younger children. Volunteers are the fabric that holds the program together and are always welcomed.

Now is the perfect time to join 4-H, as the new year begins on September 1. Although enrollment in 4-H is ongoing throughout the year, now is great because new clubs are forming in neighborhoods and new volunteer training is beginning. In Osceola, 647 members are active in 31 clubs and it only takes a call to find who is closest to you.

However, if there is not a club near your family or you want to start a club based on a particular project area then a new club can be formed. It only takes 5 youth to form a club with their ages ranging from 5 to 18. Boys and girls can be a part of the same club to help enhance social skills and to accommodate busy family schedules. The opportunity 4-H gives is great for home school families for interaction with others and for all to make new life long friends.

Club officers are elected and they plan the monthly activity meetings and community service projects, enhancing leadership skills. Members learn public speaking skills by sharing at club meetings. They teach others through show and tell type demonstrations or presentations. Club meetings are arranged to take place at convenient locations such as, a members home, recreation center, school buildings, extension
service building, etc.

To obtain more information about the Osceola 4-H youth program or to enroll for a fun-filled year, contact Cindy Moore, the 4-H Coordinator with Osceola County Extension, at 321-697-3000 or email her at ckm@mail.ifas.ufl.edu. One may also link to the state 4-H web site for more details by visiting http://osceola.ifas.ufl.edu.

Overall, the 4-H program provides non-formal educational opportunities for our youth to develop leadership and citizenship skills through a variety of activities. The 4-H motto is "To Make the Best Better". Help our youth develop to their fullest potential through a variety of fun activities. They lead the future for all of us and need our help.

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