Partners for change: Minidoka County 4-H and the Idaho Youth Ranch

The Situation
Reverend James Crowe, a Methodist minister, had a vision of a working ranch where troubled kids could grow and learn. In 1952, he formed a nonprofit corporation and applied to the federal government for a piece of southern Idaho desert. In July of that same year, President Truman signed an Act providing the Idaho Youth Ranch with four square miles of land at the price of $1.00 per acre, per year, for 25 years. The first boy arrived at the Ranch twelve miles north of Rupert in 1957.

The Idaho Youth Ranch (IYR) continues to contribute to the lives of Idaho youth and their families by providing: residential treatment for at-risk youth; family counseling; education scholarships; community transition programs; adoptions; and foster care services. Other facilities include group homes in Nampa, Idaho Falls and Coeur’d Alene and an emergency shelter in Boise.

Our Response
For over twenty years the Minidoka County 4-H Program has partnered with the IYR to provide quality youth development programs for the girls and boys residing at the Rupert facility.

Minidoka County 4-H and the IYR are natural partners because of their dedication to youth. The 4-H Mission is that 4-H empowers youth to reach their full potential, working and learning in partnership with caring adults. The 4-H Vision is a world in which youth and adults learn, grow and work together as catalysts for positive change. Compare that to the IYR Mission Statement which includes, “we help each child find the hope, vision, courage and will to succeed. We provide stability, opportunity and security. We encourage growth and offer a chance to develop confidence, independence, esteem and respect. We teach values, responsibility and self discipline in honest, caring environments. We believe in family, work, accountability, education and responsible behavior. We are a catalyst for change.” Not surprising that these two organizations are able to work together and provide quality youth development programs that are changing the lives of troubled children. Of the thirty five life skills listed on the Iowa State University Life Skills model, many are listed in the IYR Mission Statement.

4-H at the IYR is quite similar to 4-H in traditional Minidoka County clubs. Each member is required to attend meetings, present demonstrations, complete record books and finish projects according to the Idaho 4-H Policies and Procedures and Minidoka County 4-H. Community service is a priority at the IYR and many activities are completed by residents.
One big difference is that many of the teens, who are members of the IYR Oasis Wranglers 4-H Club, have never handled farm animals or ridden horses before their 4-H experience. The first county weigh-ins are always a challenge, but with lots of try and unique solutions the job is completed and everyone has fun getting “hands on” with animals. Adult supervisors at the IYR are trained and certified 4-H volunteers and often help with other 4-H activities during the year.

Program Outcomes

In an article entitled “Horse Therapy Program Helps Troubled Children”, published in the Winter 2008/09 edition of The Bridge Builder (IYR Foundation publication), it states; “since so many of the young people at The Ranch have been harmed by adults, and working with animals can be unpredictable yet “safer” than dealing directly with people, there are many feelings that are generated by the exposure to horses and other animals. Any reactions or emotions that come up during riding or the 4-H work are also used in the individual and group counseling sessions led by The Ranch clinician.”

4-H projects completed by residents at the IYR have traditionally included horses and market livestock projects, namely, beef, sheep and swine. Dairy projects were also completed in 2007. The Fall 2006 edition of The Bridge Builder, included an article entitled, “The Youth Ranch Goes to the Fair”. It reports that the youth received 56 blue and 27 red awards and no white. Three of these novice 4-H members also won their individual showmanship classes and two also advanced to the championship quality rounds with their projects. It also states, “It is noteworthy that the market prices were identical for The Ranch kid pigs and county kid pigs. Our kids don’t have the same community contacts when they enter the fair as other 4-H participants. The fact that the local community shows them the same support is a tremendous statement of the community’s support for the Youth Ranch program. Many of the kids expressed their gratitude for being able to participate in 4-H this year. Some even showed a desire to have a 4-H project next year when they returned home. Overall all said they learned from the experience.”

Future Plans

2008 brought many changes to the IYR and unfortunately the youth were unable to participate in 4-H. As with many things, changes sometimes turn out better than expected and in 2009 the youth at the IYR have been able to participate in more Minidoka County 4-H activities than ever before.

Nine girls attended the 9th annual Horsen’ Around Camp in January, eleven boys and girls attended Jump Into Spring activities in March and participated in a service project for Minidoka County Animal Control, where youth sewed kennel pads and made homemade treats for the dogs. In addition to beef, swine, dairy and horse projects the youth at the IYR are also completing photography and Handiwork from Our Heritage, (rawhide braiding) projects in 2009.

The Minidoka County 4-H faculty, staff and volunteer leaders will continue to welcome the youth from the Idaho Youth ranch to the 4-H program and encourage both the adult supervisors and youth from the IYR to participate in all the opportunities 4-H provides. Together, this equal opportunity partnership will continue to change the lives of youth in Minidoka County.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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